Steps

by Daniel Harris

He deplaned Air France flight 9 from JFK to Charles de Gaulle airport at quarter past noon. He had to connect with an EasyJet flight to Nice at terminal 2E. The connection would involve a long walk and a shuttle bus ride. The signage was confusing, but he had traveled this route a dozen times and knew it well. His luggage was a backpack and a baritone saxophone in a leather gig bag. The plane from JFK was fifteen minutes late. He would have to hustle to make the connection.

He passed the train station where a Paris bound B3 RER train was waiting in the station.

Why is it when I need to get to Paris in a hurry, there never is a train, but when I don't need one, it's waiting in the station?

He continued walking briskly, certain of his route.

Somehow he missed a turn and descended into a restricted part of the airport.

—Excuse me, sir. This is a forbidden zone, said the armed guard.

—I'm sorry officer, but I am lost. I need to connect to EasyJet at terminal 2E.

—Take that door and follow the signs to the transfer bus to terminal 2.

—Thank you.

A sign on the door said: *No Luggage Trolleys*. He entered the door. He found himself in an enclosed escalator stairwell. The door closed behind him. There was no landing; the first step of the escalator was flush with the doorsill. The stairs were not moving when he opened the door, but activated when his foot touched the first step.

It was a long escalator, probably two stories or more. He could not see the top of the escalator from the bottom.

When he had ascended halfway, he looked through a lone Plexiglas window and saw other escalators ascending and descending. They were filled with people carrying bags and trailing

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rolling luggage. He believed he was on the correct route headed in the proper direction.

At the head of the escalator was a door. It was a glass and metal door. There was no landing there. The top step of the escalator slid under the doorsill and disappeared.

When he arrived at the top of the escalator, he reached out to push the exit bar on the door. The door did not open. The escalator did not stop. His head and his saxophone case hit the door simultaneously. His feet hit the bottom of the door. He fell backward. His backpack saved his head from injury on the sharp edges of the metal steps of the escalator. He struggled to regain his footing. The image of a cockroach on its back struggling to right itself before being sucked down a sink drain flashed before him. The escalator steps kept moving upward toward the door where they disappeared into the floor. He released his grip on the saxophone. It struck the locked door and slewed sideways wedging itself between the side of the escalator and the locked door. The case would hit the door, slide back a few inches, and then be pushed against the door by the following step.

He managed to right himself, but he couldn't stand in time to prevent his fingers from being pinched by the moving steps as they slid under the door. Three of the fingers on his right hand were pulled into the step mechanism to the second joint in each finger. In a panic he pulled his hand free ripping skin off the three fingers. The effort caused him to fall backward. His left foot caught under the saxophone case preventing him from falling on his back. The escalator carried him back into the door. He regained his footing only to be confronted by the locked door. By walking backward, he was able to keep from hitting the door. His baritone saxophone case hit the glass door with a hypnotic regularity.

He decided that he should try to run down the escalator. At the entry door he could exit and tell the guard about the problem. He turned and began running down the stairs. The escalator was not particularly fast, but it took his best efforts to run against the relentless upward march of moving steps. After a major effort, he

reached the bottom. He pushed the exit bar. The door was locked. Holding the emergency exit bar with his uninjured hand, he began shouting and pounding on the door. No one came to the door. He had to run to stay at the bottom of the escalator. He decided to return to the head of the escalator where there was a glass door with a view to the concourse. Maybe someone would notice him.

His heart pounded in his chest from fear of entrapment and exertion as he rode the escalator back to the upper door. At the halfway point where he could see the other escalators full of travelers though the Plexiglas window, he screamed.

—Help! Help me! I'm trapped. Help!

Not a head turned.

When he arrived at the top, he slammed the exit bar with his open hands. It didn't budge. He had to walk backward at a brisk pace to keep from being pushed into the door. With both hands he pounded on the glass door while walking backward to maintain his balance on the moving steps. Blood from his injured hand splattered his face and smeared the glass door.

A woman with two children walked by the door at the top of the escalator.

—Help! Help me! *Aide-moi*. *Aide-moi*. Help!

One of the children smiled and waved at him.

Did the child hear his pounding or was it just coincidence that the child saw him?

He was walking backward as fast as he could, just able to keep from being forced into the door.

More people walked past the door. He pounded the door and screamed with increasing panic. His legs started to cramp from walking backward. He turned around and walked facing down the escalator. It relieved the cramps, but he could not see out the door. The escalator never stopped. The unremitting upward movement of the steps was maddening.

How long before someone would notice my plight? Surely someone else must use this escalator. Why isn't there a level landing

area here? Who built this thing? Fucking French. I can't keep walking forever!

He took off his backpack and threw it as far as he could down the escalator. It landed near the Plexiglas window, ascended a few feet riding the handrail and then fell onto the moving steps. One of the shoulder strap buckles caught on a seam in the metal sidewall of the escalator. It too began a soft rhythmic thumping sound as it hit against the sidewall.

Take it easy. Calm down. Relax. Try and conserve energy. Think about how to escape.

He took slow deep breaths and consciously relaxed as much of his body as he could. He became aware of how much his right hand hurt. Pounding on the door had injured it further.

When I escape this torture, it will be difficult to play the gig. Can I bend those fingers?

He tried to flex the fingers on his right hand. He couldn't move his ring finger.

They will have to hire a sub. Maybe if I can soak my hand in warm water the fingers will loosen up enough to curve into position. I should try and hold my fingers in playing position.

Looking at his hand he lost his pace for a second and stumbled almost falling.

Damn. I have to be careful.

He heard someone trying the door behind him. He turned around, twisting his left knee. He saw a pair of flight attendants pulling rolling luggage walk away from the door. They appeared to be laughing loudly.

I can't hear them! All this time I thought people could hear me shouting, but they couldn't. How could it be so fucked up?

Walking backward hurt his left knee. He would have to turn around, but he had to protect his left knee. He couldn't afford to have his knee give out. He mentally went through the maneuver of turning around. He made the move but his left heel caught on a step. He tripped. His right hand landed on the saxophone case breaking his fall. He looked like a football center hiking a football,

except his feet moved with the ceaseless backward steps. He didn't hit his knees, but his left knee was talking to him. He would have to turn around or the knee would collapse.

Think this through. You can't afford another fall. How long have I been here?

He looked at his watch. It was 12:55. He had been trapped for at least thirty minutes. It seemed much longer. It took two more tries before he was turned so he faced down the escalator. He could see and hear his pack slapping against the sidewall. His back was to the glass door.

Am I hallucinating, or has someone increased the speed of the escalator? Is that someone trying the door behind me? Maybe the person who tried the door saw me and will summon help. How much longer with this madness?

His watch said 1:25. He needed to use a toilet. No help came. There was only the relentless ascending of the steps.

Can I piss while walking on this conveyor belt? Can I unzip my fly while walking these steps? I have to hold it. This is the only suit I have. I don't need to piss my pants. For sure I'll be rescued as soon as I soil my trousers.

The escalator seemed to slow noticeably, pause and then resume its relentless climb. He teetered and almost fell, but he regained his balance and pace with the elevator.

Did someone stop this diabolical moving stairway? Or am I losing it? I almost stumbled. I need water. Maybe I shouldn't piss. Doesn't your body conserve liquids when you're dehydrated? Didn't I read that somewhere?

All the thinking about water made him forget the worsening pain in his left knee. There was a new pain radiating from his left shoulder down his arm.

Now what? How long have I been on this treadmill?

He looked at his watch. It said 1:50.

Was that Paris time or New York Time? He couldn't remember. Let's see six hours difference between New York and Paris. If it were 1:50 in New York it would be 7:50 in Paris. I can't have been in this

nightmare that long. I must have reset my watch. I always set my watch to the destination time after takeoff.

He looked at his right hand. It was purplish. He was favoring his left knee, walking with a limp. There was a sharp pain in his shoulder. He vomited. He bent over holding his chest. A stronger shooting pain in the center of his chest ended his thoughts. He collapsed onto the steps. His sphincters relaxed soiling his suit.

The endless steps pushed the body against the glass door. It lay twisted like a broken doll. The left hand was forced under the doorsill by the steps. The left cheek lay against the doorsill. Each passing step ripped flesh from the head. The left ear was torn off. Eventually the left hand was severed from the wrist. The jaw broke, flopping with the incessant progression of the steps. It too was pulled into the masticating gears of the steps . His clothing caught in the mechanism causing his body to twist into an even more contorted posture. The saxophone case kept up its rhythmic bumping, playing a broken waltz with the thumping backpack to the deaf corpse.

At 6 p.m., a relief guard arrived to patrol the forbidden zone. The new guard heard the escalator running. He opened the door, saw that the escalator was moving, went to the control panel and halted it.

At three in the morning a cleaning crew discovered the mutilated body. Most of the head had been shorn off by the incessant chaffing of the steps. The leather on the saxophone case was shredded and key work had been ripped from the body of the saxophone..

The man's death did not go unreported. The first notice was a brief announcement in a late edition of *The New York Times*.

American Musician Found Dead In Paris

Well-known avant-garde musician Bixby Tuttle was found dead today on a little used escalator at Charles de Gaulle airport. Mr. Tuttle was an influential performer, composer, and bandleader in the New York avant-garde dating back to the loft music scene of the late 60's. He was considered the godfather of collective improvisation and influenced two generations of jazz and avant-garde musicians. A

security official at Charles de Gaulle airport announced his death, the cause of which has yet to be determined. He was 71 years old.