

Steps

Bixby Tuttle deplaned Air France flight 9 from JFK to Charles de Gaulle airport at a quarter past noon. He had to transfer to terminal 2E for his EasyJet flight to Nice. The connection would involve a long walk and a shuttle bus ride. The signage could be confusing, but he had traveled this route a dozen times. 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 his connection.

He passed the train station where a Paris-bound B3 RER train idled in the station.

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

Confident of his route, he weaved around slower travelers. He missed a turn and descended into a restricted part of the airport.

"Excuse me, sir. This is a forbidden zone," said an armed guard.

"Sorry officer. I'm 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. *Merci beaucoup.*"

A sign on the door read: **No Luggage Trolleys**. He entered the door where he found himself in an enclosed escalator stairwell. The door closed behind him. There was no landing; the first step 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. He could just see the door at the top.

When he had ascended halfway, he looked through a Plexiglas window; Tuttle saw other escalators ascending and descending filled with people carrying bags and trailing rolling luggage. He believed he was on the correct route, headed in the right direction.

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

When he arrived at the top, he reached to push the exit bar on the door. The door did not open. The steps continued in their endless loop. His head and saxophone case smacked the closed door. When his feet hit the door, he fell backward. His backpack saved his head from injury on the steps sharp edges. He struggled to regain his footing. The image of a capsized turtle on its back,

legs flailing, flashed before him. The moving steps did not stop. He released his saxophone case. It struck the locked door and slewed sideways wedging itself between the side of the escalator and the locked door. The case struck the door, slid backward, then rammed the door pushed by the following step.

Afraid of smashing into the door again, he regained his feet but failed to keep his fingers from being pinched under the door sill. Three fingers on his right hand jammed into the step mechanism. Panicked, he pulled his hand free, ripping flesh from the three fingers. The effort caused him to lean backward. His left foot slid under the saxophone case preventing him from falling on his back. The escalator carried him toward the door. Back on his feet, he had to walk backward to keep from hitting the door.

His saxophone case struck the glass door with a hypnotic three-beat, waltz-time: click, bump, slide; click, bump, slide.

I should run down the escalator. For sure, the entry door is unlocked, I'll exit and tell the guard about the problem.

He turned and ran down the stairs. The escalator was not fast, but it took his best efforts to run against the relentless upward march of the steps. Gasping, he reached the bottom. He pushed the exit bar. The door did not open. Grasping the emergency exit bar with his injured hand, he shouted and pounded on the door. No one answered. He had to run to keep from being swept up by the mechanical monster stairs. He decided to return to the glass door with a view of the concourse.

"With luck, some alert soul will notice me," he said aloud.

As he rode to the upper door, his heart pounded from fear and exertion. When he reached the plexiglass window, he saw the other escalators packed with travelers, 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 fists, he pounded on the glass door all the while walking backward to maintain his place on the moving steps. Blood from his injured hand splattered his face and smeared the glass door.

A woman and two children walked by the door.

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

One child smiled and waved at him.

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

Only by walking backward, was he able to keep from being forced into the door.

Plane loads of travelers passed by the door in waves. He pounded the door and yelled with increasing panic. His legs began to cramp from walking backward. He turned around and paced against the upward flow. It relieved the cramps. 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? What genius built this thing? Fucking French. I can't keep walking forever!

He took off his backpack and threw it 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 began a loping long-short two-beat counterpoint to the saxophone case's waltz.

Take it easy. Calm down. Try to relax. You must conserve energy. Think about how to escape.

He took slow deep breaths. His right hand hurt. Pounding on the door had aggravated his injuries.

"When I escape this torture, it will be impossible to play the gig. Can I bend my fingers?" he asked aloud.

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

They will have to hire a sub. Maybe if I soak my hand in warm water I can regain flexibility. I should hold my fingers in their playing position.

Studying his mangled hand, he lost his pace for a second and stumbled, almost falling.

"Damn! I must be careful."

Someone rattled the door behind him. He turned around, twisting his left knee. A pair of flight attendants pulling rolling luggage walked away from the door. They appeared to be laughing.

I can't hear them! They can't hear me! It's a soundproof door. How can it be so fucked up?

His left knee hurt from walking backward. He would have to turn around, but he had to protect his injured knee. A knee failure would be fatal. He rehearsed the maneuver of turning around in his mind. When he turned, he caught his left heel on a step. He tripped. His right hand landed on the saxophone case breaking his fall. Bent over like a football center preparing to hike a football, he kept his feet moving to the tempo of the stairs. His left knee hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. He had to turn back.

"Think this through," he said aloud. "You can't afford another fall. How long have I been here?"

He looked at his watch. It was 12:55. Thirty minutes of torture. It seemed longer. After two failed attempts to make the turn, he made a concentrated effort. Success. He saw his backpack slapping against the sidewall, but his back again faced the glass door.

Am I hallucinating, or has someone increased the speed of the escalator? Is someone at the door behind me? Did that person see me? Will they summon help? How much longer with this madness?

His watch said 1:25. Now he needed to use a toilet. No help came. The relentless passing of the steps marked the time. He calculated the speed of the steps. One step every second. Because of his damaged knee, he had to put both feet on each step before meeting the next rising step. He had to walk twice as fast to stay in one place.

Is my bladder really full, or is fear making me want to pee? Can I piss while walking on this infernal stair? Can I even unzip my fly? I have to hold it. This is the only suit I have. I can't wet my pants or stink of urine.

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

Did someone stop this diabolical moving stairway? Or am I losing it? Christ, I stumbled. Another fall and I'm history. I need water. Should I piss? Doesn't your body conserve liquids when you're dehydrated? I remember reading 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 in this hell? Should I use my saxophone as a battering ram and try to break the glass? When he pounded on the glass door it seemed solid, like security glass. I'll need my horn when I get out of this.

He looked at his watch: 1:50.

Paris time or New York time? 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 for six hours. 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. There was a sharp pain in his shoulder. He vomited. He bent over holding his chest. A shooting pain in the center of his chest ended his thoughts. He collapsed onto his saxophone. His sphincters relaxed soiling his suit.

The endless steps pushed his body against the glass door. It lay crumpled half on the saxophone case. With a crack, the steps sucked the man's left hand under the door. A severed ear slipped under the stairs. Each passing step scraped flesh from the head. The mechanical stairs severed his right hand cleaner than a meat cleaver. Next the steps wrenched the mandible from the head swallowing bone and teeth in its mechanical maw. His tie caught in the steps, twisting his body off the saxophone, which resumed its broken waltz with the thumping backpack.

At 6 p.m., a relief guard arrived to patrol the forbidden zone. He heard the escalator running and shut it off.

At three in the morning, a cleaning crew discovered the mutilated body. Incessant chaffing of the metal steps reduced the head to a bloody gray gelatinous glob. Shredded leather, mangled keys, skin, bone, and fabric crowded the door sill. The headless body looked like a war casualty. Two of the cleaning crew vomited at the sight.

A woman screamed. A man in front of her with a backpack and a musical instrument case collapsed on the escalator. His body blocked her path. She fell on top of the man who struggled to stand. She scrambled over his body and crawled to safety scattering the contents of her purse. Her suitcase piled up against the man. Passengers jumped or climbed over the man abandoning their bags. The shoulder strap of the saxophone case jammed in the escalator. The escalator entered auto-stop mode and chimed a musical ding-bong.

Bixby Tuttle felt hair tickling his ear. He smelled a woman's makeup. Her perfume did not mask her womanly scent. The coolness of her face contrasted with his sweaty funk.

"Mr. Tuttle, wake up. We have arrived at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris."

He opened his eyes. Perspiration soaked his shirt. A female flight attendant leaned over the seat in front of him, her eyes darting over his face. A male flight attendant had two fingers on his carotid artery.

"Mr. Bixby Tuttle?"

"Yes?"

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes. I had a most realistic frightening dream. I fell on an escalator. A woman crawled over me."

The woman in the window seat was no longer next to him. She must have climbed over his sleeping body, which probably triggered his dream.

"I'm fine." He managed a wan smile. "I'm sorry if I frightened you."

"We thought we lost you," said the female flight attendant, scanning his face for signs of stroke or other medical malady.

"Your pulse is strong and steady," said the male flight attendant, taking his fingers off Tuttle's neck.

"I'm so embarrassed. I apologize for alarming you." He wanted to kiss the female flight attendant. Her face was like Botticelli's Venus.

He shuffled his imposing frame into the aisle. The male flight attendant handed him his saxophone and carried his backpack to the front of the plane. The flight crew stood by the cockpit door. They were all smiles, but observed his gait for signs of weakness.

"You will have to hurry Mr. Tuttle," said the Captain. "You only have forty-five minutes to catch your EasyJet flight."

"Do you want someone to accompany you?" asked the Botticelli Venus.

"No, thank you. I've done this transfer a dozen times. I know a few shortcuts."

He shouldered his pack and headed down the concourse. As he passed the train station, a Paris-bound RER B3 stood train idling with doors ajar.

This is like déjà vu all over again. Such a stupid expression

Confident of his route, he trotted down the corridors weaving around slower travelers. Somewhere he missed a turn and descended into a restricted part of the airport.

"Excuse me, sir. This is a forbidden zone," said an armed guard.

"Sorry officer. I'm 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. Merci beaucoup".

He opened the door. There was an escalator. It started when his foot touched the first step. The door closed behind him.

Bixby Tuttle, Jazz Master, Found Dead in Paris
The New York Times, April 1, 2016

Respected avant-garde jazz 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 music scene dating from the free music developments of the 1960s. He was considered the godfather of collective improvisation and influenced two generations of musicians and the course of jazz and improvisational concert music. A security official at Charles de Gaulle airport reported his death to his son, Napoleon Tuttle, President of the Brooklyn Arts Council. The cause of death has yet to be determined. Bixby Tuttle was 71 years old. A memorial concert is planned later this Spring. A full obituary will appear in tomorrow's paper.

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