Two Minutes Forty-Five Seconds

by Dan Simmons

Introduction

One of my favorite people in publishing—if not the world—is Ellen Datlow, fiction editor of OMNI. For awhile they were calling Ellen the Mother of Cyberbunk, but I think they were getting her mixed up with Mother Teresa.

One day Ellen phoned me, announced that she was commissioning a bunch of very short horror-SF pieces for OMNI and asked if I would be interested.

"Ellen, is this so you can pay three grand for seven or eight of us rather than the same amount for one story?" I ask.

"Sure," she says.

"And is it so you can say you ran *eight* pieces of fic-tion in the issue instead of the one measly story they allow you that month?" I persist.

"Of course," says Ellen. "What else?"

"And are you calling me because you know I work cheap, write fast, and essentially worship the ground you walk on?"

"Sure," says Ellen. "Plus you're behind on payments from the deal where we let you sit at the OMNI table at the World Fantasy Con banquet two years ago, and I fig-ure I can deduct most of your fee for this to get you caught up."

"Count me in," I said.

She had only one condition. The other contributors (their stuff was already in, but there was room for one more story because layout had moved a Trojan ad) had written horror stories that were *horror*. "They forgot it was horror/SF," said Ellen. "Make sure yours is high-tech hor-ror."

"High-tech horror," I said. "Right. No problem."

I hung up the phone, warmed up the computer, flexed nimble fingers over the keyboard, turned off the computer, and said to myself, "What the hell is high-tech horror?"

Now I know. "Two Minutes Forty-five Seconds" is high-tech horror.

As a footnote, I should mention that I spent several hours on the phone with OMNI's lawyers about this story. A partial transcript of one conversation follows:

OMNI LAWYER: Is this story really about the Chal-lenger explosion?

ME: Of course it's really about the Challenger explo-sion.

O.L.: No, *it is not about the Challenger explosion.*

ME: Of course it's not about the Challenger explosion. Uh ... what's it about?

O.L.: Obviously it's about an *alternate reality* ... one in which a certain unnamed shuttle exploded, possibly re-lated to alleged negligence by an unnamed and/or fic-tional corporation which *bears no resemblance* to any corporation, individual, and or planet in this universe. Correct?

ME: Uh, right. That's what I had in mind.

O.L.: One more thing. You'll have to change your working title for this story.

ME: Right! Sure. Why?

O.L.: We think "Love Song to J. M*rt*n Th**k*l" is ... ah ... inadvisable.

ME: OK. How about ... "The Day Corporate Greed and Malfeasance Killed Seven of Our Astronauts and Al-most Killed Our Space Program?"

O.L.: Let us think about that. We'll get back to you.

Epilogue to the Footnote:

Recently Ellen Datlow chose "Two Minutes Forty-five Seconds" to be in the second annual edition of *The Year's Best Fantasy*, a collection she co-edits with Terry Windling. Ellen wrote the introduction to the story, and in it she says:

It's a compact and chilling tale about guilt, based in part on a very well-publicized event in our re-cent past—the Challenger disaster.

Excuse me, I have to go now. The phone's ringing, there's a process-server at the door, and a corporate helicopter has just landed in the back yard.

*** * ***

Roger Colvin closed his eyes and the steel bar clamped down across his lap and they began the steep climb. He could hear the rattle of the heavy chain and the creek of steel wheels on steel rails as they clanked up the first hill of the rollercoaster. Someone behind him laughed ner-vously. Terrified of heights, heart pounding painfully against his ribs, Colvin peeked out from between spread fingers.

The metal rails and white wooden frame rose steeply ahead of him. Colvin was in the first car. He lowered both hands and tightly gripped the metal restraining bar, feeling the dried sweat of past palms there. Someone giggled in the car behind him. He turned his head only far enough to peer over the side of the rails.

They were very high and still rising. The midway and parking lots grew smaller, individuals growing too tiny to be seen and the crowds becoming mere carpets of color, fading into a larger mosaic of geometries of streets and lights as the entire city became visible, then the entire county. They clanked higher. The sky darkened to a

deeper blue. Colvin could see the curve of the earth in the haze-blued distance. He realized that they were far out over the edge of a lake now as he caught the glimmer of light on wavetops miles below through the wooden ties. Colvin closed his eyes as they briefly passed through the cold breath of a cloud, then snapped them open again as the pitch of chain rumble changed, as the steep gradient less-ened, as they reached the top.

And went over.

There was nothing beyond. The two rails curved out and down and ended in air.

Colvin gripped the restraining bar as the car pitched forward and over. He opened his mouth to scream. The fall began.

"Hey, the worst part's over." Colvin opened his eyes to see Bill Montgomery handing him a drink. The sound of the Gulfstream's jet engines was a dull rumble under the gentle hissing of air from the overhead ventilator nozzle. Colvin took the drink, turned down the flow of air, and glanced out the window. Logan International was already out of sight behind them and Colvin could make out Nantasket Beach below, a score of small white triangles of sail in the expanse of bay and ocean beyond. They were still climbing.

"Damn, we're glad you decided to come with us this time, Roger," Montgomery said to Colvin. "It's good hav-ing the whole team together again. Like the old days." Montgomery smiled. The three other men in the cabin raised their glasses.

Colvin played with the calculator in his lap and sipped his vodka. He took a breath and closed his eyes.

Afraid of heights. *Always* afraid. Six years old and in the barn, tumbling from the loft, the fall seemingly end-less, time stretching out, the sharp tines of the pitchfork rising toward him. Landing, wind knocked out of him, cheek and right eye against the straw, three inches from the steel points of the pitchfork.

"The company's ready to see better days," said Larry Miller. "Two and a half years of bad press is enough. Be good to see the launch tomorrow. Get things started again."

"Here, here," said Tom Weiscott. It was not yet noon but Tom had already had too much to drink.

Colvin opened his eyes and smiled. Counting himself, there were four corporate vice presidents in the plane. Weiscott was still a Project Manager. Colvin put his cheek to the window and watched Cape Cod Bay pass below. He guessed their altitude to be eleven or twelve thousand feet and climbing.

Colvin imagined a building nine miles high. From the carpeted hall of the top floor he would step into the eleva-tor. The floor of the elevator would be made of glass. The elevator shaft drops away 4,600 floors beneath him, each floor marked with halogen

lights, the parallel lights draw-ing closer in the nine miles of black air beneath him until they merged in a blur below.

He looks up in time to see the cable snap, separate. He falls, clutching futilely at the inside walls of the elevator, walls which have grown as slippery as the clear glass floor. Lights rush by, but already the concrete floor of the shaft is visible miles below—a tiny blue concrete square, growing as the elevator car plummets. He knows that he has almost three minutes to watch that blue square come closer, rise up to smash him. Colvin screams and the spit-tle floats in the air in front of him, falling at the same ve-locity, hanging there. The lights rush past. The blue square grows.

Colvin took a drink, placed the glass in the circle set in the wide arm of his chair, and tapped away at his cal-culator.

Falling objects in a gravity field follow precise mathe-matical rules, as precise as the force vectors and burn rates in the shaped charges and solid fuels Colvin had designed for twenty years, but just as oxygen affects combustion rates, so air controls the speed of a falling body. Terminal velocity depends upon atmospheric pressure, mass distri-bution, and surface area as much as upon gravity.

Colvin lowered his eyelids as if to doze and saw what he saw every night when he pretended to sleep; the bil-lowing white cloud, expanding outward like a time-lapse film of a slanting, tilting stratocumulus blossoming against a dark blue sky, the reddish brown interior of nitrogen tetroxide flame, and—just visible below the two emerging, mindless contrails of the SRBs—the tumbling, fuzzy square of the forward fuselage, flight deck included. Even the most amplified images had not shown him the closer details—the intact pressure vessel that was the crew compartment, scorched on the right side where the runaway SRD had played its flame upon it, tumbling, falling free, trailing wires and cables and shreds of fuselage behind it like an umbilical and afterbirth. The earlier images had not shown these details, but Colvin had seen them, touched them, after the fracturing impact with the merciless blue sea. There were layers of tiny barnacles growing on the ruptured skin. Colvin imagined the darkness and cold waiting at the end of that fall; small fish feeding.

"Roger," said Steve Cahill, "where'd you get your fear of flying?"

Colvin shrugged, finished his vodka. "I don't know." In Viet Nam—not "Nam" or "in-country"—a place Colvin still wanted to think of as a place rather than a con-dition, he had flown. Already an expert on shaped charges and propellants, Colvin was being flown out to Bong Son Valley near the coast to see why a shipment of standard C-4 plastic explosive was not detonating for an ARVN unit when the Jesus nut came off their Huey and the helicopter fell, rotorless, 280 feet into the jungle, tore through almost a hundred feet of thick vegetation, and came to a stop, upside down, in vines ten feet above the ground. The pilot had been neatly impaled by a limb that smashed up through the floor of the Huey. The co-pilot's

skull had smashed through the windshield. The gunner was thrown out, breaking his neck and back, and died the next day. Colvin walked away with a sprained ankle.

Colvin looked down as they crossed Nantucket. He es-timated their altitude at eighteen thousand feet and climb-ing steadily. Their cruising altitude, he knew, was to be thirty-two thousand feet. Much lower than forty-six thou-sand, especially lacking the vertical thrust vector, but so much depended upon surface area.

When Colvin was a boy in the 1950's, he saw a pho-tograph in the "old" *National Enquirer* of a woman who had jumped off the Empire State Building and landed on the roof of a car. Her legs were crossed almost casually at the ankles; there was a hole in the toe of one of her nylon stockings. The roof of the car was flattened, folded inward, almost like a large goosedown mattress, molding it-self to the weight of a sleeping person. The woman's head looked as if it were sunk deep in a soft pillow.

Colvin tapped at his calculator. A woman stepping off the Empire State Building would fall for almost fourteen seconds before hitting the street. Someone falling in a metal box from 46,000 feet would fall for two minutes and forty-five seconds before hitting the water.

What did she think about? What did *they* think about?

Most popular songs and rock videos are about three minutes long, thought Colvin. It is a good length of time; not so long one gets bored, long enough to tell a complete story.

"We're damned glad you're with us," Bill Montgom-ery said again.

"Goddammit," Bill Montgomery had whispered to Colvin outside the company teleconference room twenty-seven months earlier, "are you with us or against us on this?"

A teleconference was much like a seance. The group sat in semi-darkened rooms hundreds or thousands of miles apart and communed with voices which came from nowhere.

"Well, that's the weather situation here," came the voice from KSC. "What's it to be?"

"We've seen your telefaxed stuff," said the voice from Marshall, "but still don't understand why we should con-sider scrubbing based on an anomaly that small. You as-sured us that this stuff was so fail-safe that you could kick it around the block if you wanted to."

Phil McGuire, the chief engineer on Colvin's project team, squirmed in his seat and spoke too loudly. The four-wire teleconference phones had speakers near each chair and could pick up the softest tones. "You *don't* understand, do you?" McGuire almost shouted. "It's the *combination* of these cold temperatures and the likelihood

of electrical activity in that cloud layer that causes the problems. In the past five flights there've been three transient events in the leads that run from SRB linear shaped charges to the Range Safety command antennas..."

"Transient events," said the voice from KSC, "but within flight certification parameters?"

"Well ... yes," said McGuire. He sounded close to tears. "But it's within parameters because we keep signing papers and rewriting the goddamn parameters. We just don't *know* why the C-12B shaped range safety charges on the SRBs and ET record a transient current flow when no enable functions have been transmitted. Roger thinks maybe the LSC enable leads or the C-12 compound itself can accidentally allow the static discharge to simulate a command signal ... Oh, hell, *tell* them, Roger."

"Mr. Colvin?" came the voice from Marshall.

Colvin cleared his throat. "That's what we've been watching for some time. Preliminary data suggests that temperatures below 28 degrees Fahrenheit allow the zinc oxide residue in the C-12B stacks to conduct a false signal ... if there's enough static discharge ... theoretically..."

"But no solid database on this yet?" said the voice from Marshall.

"No," said Colvin.

"And you did sign the Critically One waiver certifying flight readiness on the last three flights?"

"Yes," said Colvin.

"Well," said the voice from KSC, "we've heard from the engineers at Beaunet-HCS, what do you say we have recommendations from management there?"

Bill Montgomery had called a five-minute break and the management team met in the hall. "Goddammit, Roger, are you with us or against us on this one?"

Colvin had looked away.

"I'm serious," snapped Montgomery. "The LCS divi-sion has brought this company 215 million dollars *in profit* this year, and your work has been an important part of that success, Roger. Now you seem ready to flush that away on some goddamn transient telemetry readings that don't mean *anything* when compared to the work we've done as a team. There's a vice-presidency opening in a few months, Roger. Don't screw your chances by losing your head like that hysteric McGuire."

"Ready?" said the voice from KSC when five minutes had passed.

"Go," said Vice-President Bill Montgomery.

"Go," said Vice-President Larry Miller.

"Go," said Vice-President Steve Cahill.

"Go," said Project Manager Tom Weiscott.

"Go," said Project Manager Roger Colvin.

"Fine," said KSC. "I'll pass along the recommenda-tion. Sorry you gentlemen won't be here to watch the lift-off tomorrow."

Colvin turned his head as Bill Montgomery called from his side of the cabin, "Hey, I think I see Long Is-land."

"Bill," said Colvin, "how much did the company make this year on the C-12B redesign?"

Montgomery took a drink and stretched his legs in the roomy interior of the Gulfstream. "About four hundred million, I think, Rog. Why?"

"And did the Agency ever seriously consider going to someone else after ... after?"

"Shit," said Tom Weiscott, "where else could they go? We got them by the short hairs. They thought about it for a few months and then came crawling back. You're the best designer of shaped range safety devices and solid hypergolics in the country, Rog."

Colvin nodded, worked with his calculator a minute and closed his eyes.

The steel bar clamped down across his lap and the car he rode in clanked higher and higher. The air grew thin and cold, the screech of wheel on rail dwindling into a thin scream as the rollercoaster lumbered above the six mile mark.

In case of loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will descend from the ceiling. Please fasten them securely over your mouth and nose and breath normally.

Colvin peeked ahead, up the terrible incline of the rollercoaster, sensing the summit of the climb and the emptiness beyond.

The tiny air tank-and-mask combinations were called PEAPs—Personal Egress Air Packs. PEAPs from four of the five crew-members were recovered from the ocean bottom. All had been activated. Two minutes and forty-five seconds of each five-minute air supply had been used up.

Colvin watched the summit of the rollercoaster's first hill arrive.

There was a raw metallic noise and a lurch as the rollercoaster went over the top and off the rails. People in the cars behind Colvin screamed and kept on screaming. Colvin lurched forward and grabbed the restraining bar as the rollercoaster plummeted into nine miles of nothingness. He opened his eyes. A single glimpse out

the Gulfstream window told him that the thin lines of shaped charges he had placed there had removed all of the port wing cleanly, surgically. The tumble rate suggested that enough of a stub of the starboard wing was left to provide the surface area needed to keep the terminal velocity a little lower than maximum. Two minutes and forty-five seconds, plus or minus four seconds.

Colvin reached for his calculator but it had flown free in the cabin, colliding with hurtling bottles, glasses, cushions, and bodies that had not been securely strapped in. The screaming was very loud.

Two minutes and forty-five seconds. Time to think of many things. And perhaps, just perhaps, after two and a half years of no sleep without dreams, perhaps it would be time enough for a short nap with no dreams at all. Colvin closed his eyes.

-=*@*=-