

Two Minutes

By Christopher E. Long

Two minutes.

That's what historians claim it took Abraham Lincoln to deliver the Gettysburg Address. And if it was only two minutes, then two minutes was just right.

Two minutes is how long the average television commercial break runs.

It takes an adult male's heart two minutes to beat one hundred and forty times.

Is that long enough to say all the things I've never said?

One hundred and twenty seconds.

But, more important—will she listen?

Two minutes.

How long does it take to tell someone you're sorry?

"Two minutes," Bobby says, coughing up mucous in his mouth. His bloodshot eyes dart around to find somewhere to spit, but finding nothing suitable, he swallows hard. His Adam's apple bobs up and down, as if directing traffic, ushering the phlegm down into his stomach. "That's it, no shit."

"How does it work?" I ask.

He shrugs his shoulders, causing his stained T-shirt to lift and revealing a large belly that hangs over the belt cinched around his denim cargo shorts. Thick, blue veins, which remind me of deep-sea eels, are visible under the pasty white skin on his flabby stomach. "I don't know," Bobby says.

"I'm not gonna lay down two dimes for this phone unless I get some reassurance that it can't be traced."

Squinting, Bobby studies my face, and says, "Ezra, you're safe for two minutes. That's what my guy said, and he's never steered me wrong yet. He said that it bounces off satellites or sumpin' like that."

Inspecting the phone, its appearance underwhelms me. It looks like the first cell phone I ever saw, which was actually larger than my cordless phone at the time. There are scuffs and a large dent on the phone's casing, and the screen is cracked. I press the power button. Nothing happens. Pressing it again, I hold it down for a moment, but that doesn't work. "This thing's busted," I say, tossing it to Bobby. The phone lands on his stomach and teeters there, like an automobile in a cartoon that dangles over the ledge of a cliff. It finally slides down his belly, but his hand snatches it before it can crash to the floor.

"Be careful." Bobby says, putting the phone up to his ear. "It's working."

"How can you tell?"

"I hear it."

Grabbing the phone out of his hand, I hold it up to my ear. And sure enough, I hear a faint mechanic hum. "Yeah, okay," I mutter.

The man who taught me my trade was a crusty burnout named Dirty Mike. He once told me: "You make a plan, follow it, and the rest is outta yer hands. Doin' the job is job enough." I have two minutes for this next job, and that's just going to have to do. The rest is out of my hands.

“Do you want the phone or not?” Bobby asks.

I stare at him, and he wilts under my gaze. He looks away, anywhere but at me. “If this phone doesn’t work, you’ll hear from me,” I say, all calm and collected. “One way or another, you’ll hear from me.”

Bobby releases a tiny high-pitched fart. He always farts when he’s nervous. My mother used to have a dog that would pee whenever it got excited or scared. The vet said that it suffered from submissive urination disorder. Bobby is a submissive farter. If he’s startled or scared, he rips one. “Now, now, come on, Ezra,” Bobby stammers. “Ain’t no need for threats. We’re buds, right?” He gives me a smile, but when I don’t return it, he releases another fart, a few octaves higher than the last one.

“We won’t have any problems as long as the phone works as promised,” I say.

“For two minutes, you’re golden.”

Digging into the front pocket of my jeans, I pull out a roll of bills, fastened securely with a rubber band, and say, “Does the phone cut off at two minutes?”

Bobby shakes his head and says, “No, no, no. You’ve got to keep track of the time.”

In the motion of tossing him the wad of cash, I stop, lowering my hand limply to my side, still clutching the money. “How’m I supposed to do that?”

“Use a watch.”

“Does it look like I’m sportin’ a watch?” I say.

Glancing at my bare wrist, Bobby asks, “What happened to your watch?”

“I had to hock it to get the money to buy this phone.”

“Dude, that was a nice watch.”

“I know,” I say.

“What about your score? Where’d all that—”

“Do you have a watch I can use?” I snap.

Rolling his eyes, Bobby spins around and rolls his wheelchair to a desk. He slides open the drawer and rifles through its contents. Tossing aside magazines, unpaid bills, and a variety of electronic devices, he finds what he’s looking for: a stopwatch. Bobby holds the string fastened to the stopwatch in his teeth as he rolls back toward me. Handing it over, he says, “This is on the house.”

I inspect it, my brow furrowing. “A High School Musical stopwatch?”

“It came with my Happy Meal,” Bobby says.

“Jesus, I’m glad this is on the house,” I say, finally tossing him the money. “I don’t think I have the extra fifty cents it’d cost.”

“I would think you wouldn’t be such a prick with your back against the wall,” he says. I glare at him, but he holds my stare. I keep thinking he’ll waver and look away, farting in the process, but he doesn’t.

“She’s a great gal,” Bobby says, “but enough is enough. She’s not worth getting rolled. Nobody is.” Heading toward the warehouse door, I hear Bobby’s wheelchair rolling behind me, nipping at my heels. “You can slip away with your haul,” he says. “Get away clean.” Reaching the door, I grab the doorknob, but before I can turn it, Bobby says, “Two minutes, Ezra. Not a click longer, or you’re as good as a ghost.”

With my back to him, I stand there a moment. My head’s been screaming for days, mulling over my missteps and mistakes. I’ve been treading water in a sea of regret, and I’m on the verge of sinking into a watery grave. But before that happens, there’s one

last thing I have to do. “Bobby, I’m already a ghost,” I say, opening the door and stepping outside into the afternoon sunshine.

Standing on the sidewalk, I watch the traffic hurtle by as I decide where to go. After the shit hit the fan, I knew I couldn’t go back to my apartment. The feds would be all over that building like ticks on a hound. Ditching all my possessions has left me with the clothes on my back and, after paying Bobby two grand, a wallet containing fifty dollars. After collecting my money for the job, which kicked up this shitstorm, I shipped my money to a secure location. But having two hundred and fifty thousand dollars squirreled away isn’t the same as having cash in your pocket. Essentially, I’m a broke-ass washout who stayed in the game past my prime. I got distracted, which in my line of work is game over. But she’s worth it, I keep telling myself.

I head left, because it’s just as good as right, walking down the sidewalk, past abandoned storefront after storefront tagged with spray paint and scratches in the glass. Pulling the cell phone out of my pocket, I stop at a crosswalk at a red light. I consider calling her now, but the sound of vehicles speeding by makes me reconsider. This is the most expensive phone call I’ll ever make, and it would be a shame having traffic noise make it impossible to hear.

Pocketing the phone, I walk across the intersection, no particular destination in mind. I remember a park somewhere ahead of me, so I head in that direction. As I search my memory, I vaguely recall beating a bounty hunter unconscious a few years back in that park. Tying him to a child’s merry-go-round, I got it going, spinning as fast as it could go, and then I’d smack the guy with a tree branch every time he came around.

It sounds a lot worse than it was because I missed him more times than I cracked him. At least that’s how I remember it. The bounty hunter might have a different account of the event.

My twenties were a write-off. I made a lot of money, but I also did countless things that still make me shiver to think about. The only thing of value that happened in my twenties was meeting Tina. Actually, the value came not from meeting her, or me dogging her until she finally agreed to go out with me. The value came from her seeing something in me that made her love me. I asked her once what that was, and she just smiled slyly. If there was ever an opposite of me, Tina is it.

When we first met, we were both dating other people. At the time, I was with a girl that Tina later referred to as Ferret Face, claiming the girl had beady eyes sunken into a puckered face. We were at Ferret Face’s Fourth of July company barbeque. All the women were wearing \$300 designer jeans and designer flip-flops that cost nearly as much as their jeans. When Tina strolled in with her then-boyfriend, I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Her long, brown hair hung to her waist and shimmered under the sun. She wore tight cut-offs, and the bottom of her Rolling Stones concert T-shirt—from their 1982 concert in Rotterdam, Netherlands—was tied into a knot at the small of her back, revealing her tight and bronzed midriff. Tina doesn’t remember this much detail, but I do. She was barefoot, and the tops of her feet were tanned, a product of days spent at the beach. She was a thing of beauty, and I was in love.

Ferret Face followed my stare, her eyes landing on Tina. With a look of disgust, she leaned next to my ear and said, “Ezra, you can’t possibly think that whore is hot.”

I turned to Ferret Face, smiled and said, “I think she’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

Smacking me in the face, she turned and stormed off, leaving me alone at her company party. I could feel the sting on my cheek, but it actually felt good. I felt good.

I watched Tina and Boyfriend as they mingled with other couples. Sipping a beer, I decided that I didn't like Boyfriend. He kept planting his hand on her ass and squeezing. Tina finally grabbed his hand and peeled it off her butt, giving him a warning look. Boyfriend made a big production of that, elbowing his two male coworkers and laughing.

Tina rolled her eyes and walked away from the laughing trio, heading to the cooler to retrieve another beer. I cut through the throng of people, pulled up short by a woman with too much makeup and fake tits. "Hey, Ezra, where's that lovely lady of yours?" I smiled and gently ushered her out of my way, hoping to intercept the girl in cutoffs at the cooler.

I came up beside Tina as she retrieved a bottle of beer from the ice chest and attempted to twist off the cap. Spotting me, she handed over the bottle. "Will you open this for me?" she asked. Taking the bottle, I twisted off the cap, handing it back to her. She took a long plug off the bottle, draining nearly half the beer. "Do you know Chad?" she asked me, indicating Boyfriend with a nod of the head in his direction.

"Nope," I said.

"He's an asshole."

"Seems that way."

She looked at me, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "You just said you didn't know him."

"I don't," I said, "but I don't like how he manhandles you."

She looked at me over the top of the bottle as she took another drink. "You caught that, huh?"

"Yep."

"What should I do?"

Glancing over at Chad, who was staring back at me with a smirk on his face, I pointed my finger at him like a gun. "Just give me the word, and I'll take him out," I said.

Tina snorted through her nose, then put a hand over her mouth and nose in embarrassment. I thought it was the cutest thing I'd ever heard. "Are you some kinda hit man or something?"

"Somethin' like that."

With my finger still pointed at Chad, Tina spun around and looked at her boyfriend, who looked perplexed, trying to figure out what the two of us were doing. She gently laid her hand on my arm and pushed my fake gun hand down. "He's not worth it," she laughed.

"Yeah, but you are," I said.

She gazed up at me, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "How can you tell?"

"Because something as beautiful as you is always worth it." Her smile faded as she studied me. I couldn't hold her gaze and looked away. "And I like your T-shirt."

She glanced down at the front of her shirt. "Why's that?"

"I have a friend who lives in Rotterdam, and he says every couple in love should visit the city at least once," I said.

“I wasn’t talking about the shirt,” she said, smiling at me. “I’m wondering why something beautiful is worth killing for.”

“What other reason is there?”

Without saying another word, she turned and walked back toward her boyfriend. I watched her as she left. Before reaching Chad, she looked back over her shoulder and flashed me a warm smile.

A few months later, I was downtown, having a little heart to heart with Johnny Nine Fingers, which resulted in me shoving him off the rooftop of the Crescent Heights Hotel. Johnny had skimmed money from my employer, who hired me to send a message.

I don’t usually take “muscle” jobs, but I was bored and decided the money I’d make would allow me to repaint my house. So there I was, peering over the ledge of the building, watching Johnny flounder in midair like a lame bird. Thankfully, he landed in a dumpster in the alley. I couldn’t have planned it better if I’d tried. The open lid actually slammed shut when he hit the bottom, as if swallowing him whole. That was a half-court shot if ever there was one.

Stepping out of the lobby door, past a throng of lunch-hour business people scurrying for a place to sit down and eat, I made my way against the stream of foot traffic. Passing the alleyway, I turned my head to take a quick look at the dumpster. “Hey, watch where you’re going!” This from a woman in a sharp suit and heels. It was Tina.

The slight frown on her face faded, replaced with recognition. “You,” she said.

Extending my hand to her, I said, “My name is Ezra.”

She looked at my hand before shaking it. “Tina. Tina Johnson.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Tina Johnson.”

“Do you work down here?” she asked.

“Um ... no. I just paid a visit to a friend. How about you?”

“I’m a computer security specialist at Edwards Technology.”

I’m not at all surprised that she wears business attire just as well as weekend casual wear. “I’d never guessed you were a career woman.”

“Why’s that?”

“You struck me more as a beach loafer.”

“Well, I don’t think one’s career should consume them entirely,” she said, grinning.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I smiled.

She told me over coffee that she dumped Chad shortly after the barbeque. After that, Tina and I became inseparable. It was a whirlwind romance. When we weren’t working, we were together.

At first there weren’t too many questions about what I did for a living. While she got ready for work in the morning, she’d grumble while I lay in bed. Tina was satisfied with my explanation that I was between jobs. But when a month went by, she asked how much money I had squirreled away. I told her enough to last a few more months. It wasn’t that big of a deal. Whenever I got a job, I’d take care of my business while she was at work. It worked perfectly, until I was sent to the Dominican Republic to track down a guy who’d been hiding from powerful people that he’d swindled. When I told Tina that I was leaving town for a week, she started to ask questions. The lies came easily at first, which surprised me because I’m not a liar. I hate it. I’ve never been good

at white lies, much less the black ones, but the more I told her, the easier it became. It was like I was an athlete who grew stronger and faster the more I practiced.

Tina and I never officially moved in together, but I always spent the night at her apartment because it was closer to her work. She began to suggest that I should actively look for a job. Things were getting serious between us, and she wasn't about to take our relationship to the next level with a deadbeat. So, I'd get ready with her in the morning, shaving, showering, and putting on a suit, pretending to go out on interviews. We'd leave together, kiss on the sidewalk, and head our separate ways. I'd jump in a cab and head to my apartment, lounging around until I got a phone call notifying me of a job, or just waiting until Tina got off work, meeting her back at the apartment. I'd plop down on her sofa, loosen my tie, and grumble that the job market was tough. She'd give me a kiss and tell me to hang in there. I just had to keep trying and something would turn up.

One day, I'd just finished putting a bullet into Charlie C's head and dumping the corpse into Porcupine Reservoir. I raced back to Tina's apartment just as she was pulling a casserole out of the oven. She gave me a smile that could melt ice, and said, "Where have you been?"

Crossing over to her, I planted a kiss on her cheek and said, "This bastard kept me waiting for nearly three hours for my scheduled interview."

She placed the casserole on the table and turned to look at me as I dropped my keys in the glass bowl on the counter. Her smile faded as she reached out and touched my hair, pulling her hand back and staring at her fingertips. "Is this blood?" she asked, concerned.

"What ... um ... no," I stammered, ripping a paper towel from the roll and wiping the blood from her fingers. I hurried into the bathroom, with Tina in tow behind me. Peering at my reflection in the mirror, I inspected the blood on my hair. *How could I have missed that?* I thought, cursing myself.

"What happened?" she asked. "Are you all right?"

Turning on the sink, I splashed water on my hair, washing it away. "Yeah, I'm fine. I don't know what it is."

"It looks like blood."

Drying my hair with a towel, I turned to her and did my best to give her a reassuring smile. "Nah, it's not blood. It kinda looked like transmission fluid or somethin'."

"How would transmission fluid get on your hair?" she asked, looking entirely unconvinced.

"How would blood get on my hair, for that matter?" I said, pushing past her. "The food smells great. Let's eat."

The lies were a heavy weight on my shoulders. I felt like freakin' Atlas, carrying this enormous burden. As much as I would've liked to end the charade once and for all, I wasn't willing to lose Tina in order to clear my conscience. So I trudged forward, weaving deceit like a tapestry.

But two weeks ago, Tina finally had enough. She came home from work in a crisp mood, walked into the kitchen and slammed her fist down on the counter.

"God damn you, Ezra!"

I stared at her, shocked by the outburst. "What? What'd I do?"

Tina hung her head, unable to look at me. “I did a background check on you today at work.”

I’d suspected this day would come, hoping it would come later than sooner. I’d run the scenario over and over in my mind, like a chess player seeing ten moves out and knowing how to counter. But now I felt like I was backed into a corner, with all signs indicating checkmate. “Why ... why’d you do that?”

“Because I’m tired of wondering,” she said. “I’m tired of always wondering.”

“Tina, I don’t know what you’re—”

“Shut up! Just stop lying, Ezra,” she said. “Do you know what I found in your background check? Do you?”

“No.”

A lopsided and pained smile crossed her lips. “Nothing. I found absolutely nothing.”

“See, I told you—”

“The only people who turn up nothing on a background check are people who’ve taken great pains to do so.”

“What’re you sayin’?”

“I’m saying I don’t believe your lies anymore,” she said. “And I’m saying I want you to leave.”

I remember the time I drove down to the Wakulla Swamp to dump some bodies. As I was passing under an overpass, something struck the windshield, leaving a chip in the glass. I drove for another five miles before I realized cracks were spreading out from the chip like tentacles groping around for a victim. In just a matter of minutes, it was nearly impossible to see through the shattered windshield.

I had seen the signs of the first crack in Tina’s trust, but from that chip, it spread fast, leaving both of us facing the web of my deceit. “Tina, come on,” I said. “This is crazy.”

“You remember when I found your gun in your gym bag?” she asked.

I nod my head.

“Why did it smell like gunpowder and why were there only four bullets loaded?”

“I already explained that to you.”

Mimicking my voice, she said: “I went to a shooting range and must’ve forgot to finish firing the rounds.”

“You remember, then,” I said.

“Just tell me the truth.”

“That’s the truth.”

She stared at me for the longest time, our eyes locked. I didn’t know if she was waiting for me to speak, or if she was figuring out what she was going to say. We were locked in a game of chicken, and the first one to speak lost. It got to the point where if I said something, I’d feel like I caved in. The clock on the oven ticked, ticked, ticked. Water dripped from the faucet into the sink. The sound of my breathing echoed in my ear. The air-conditioner suddenly turned off, which made all these noises suddenly louder. When I thought all this was going to drive me mad, she said, “Take your lies and get out.”

“Tina—”

“Get out.” Those were the last words Tina said to me.

The park is right where I remember it. Standing on the sidewalk, I watch three shirtless skateboarders getting run off by two bicycle cops wearing short-shorts that would make John Stockton jealous. I consider leaving, finding somewhere else to make the phone call, to avoid being identified by the five-o, but they ride behind the cursing skateboarders, ushering them out of the park. I figure I'm safe.

In recent days, my face has been on the television news stations and all over the Internet. It was my own damned fault. The pain I felt after Tina kicked me out of her life was unbearable. I was a mess. So when I got a call from Buster Horn asking if I was up for a job, I jumped at the chance. Anything would be a welcome distraction. However, while I listened to the details surrounding this job, my enthusiasm waned. I don't know if I'd characterize it as a suicide mission, but it was pretty damned close. Blue Lloyd was in protective custody awaiting trial. Many people didn't want that to happen. That's where I came in. Well, the money was good — very good — so I agreed. To be honest, at that point I didn't really care if I lived through it.

Good news was I managed to hold Blue Lloyd's head in a toilet until he stopped struggling. The bad news? The feds ID'd me, flashing my mug all over the news. I was screwed. Anonymity is really the only job requirement in my field, and mine was blown. I packed up my money, shipped it to a safe address, and made my plans to skip out of town. But before I left, there was one thing I needed to do.

Pulling out the two-minute untraceable cell phone and High School Musical stopwatch, I sit down in the shade of a pine tree. After fiddling with the stopwatch, I figure out how to work it. It would be stupid if I spent all that money and then didn't know how to press the knob above Zac Efron's head to start the clock.

Taking a deep breath, I dial Tina's number, thinking that two minutes is the length of time dentists recommend for brushing teeth.

The phone rings.

Rings.

Rings.

Right when I hear the call connect, the phone on the other end picking up, I start the stopwatch. "Hello," Tina says.

"Hey, Tina."

There's a pause on the end of the line. The silence seems like it goes on forever. I glance at the stopwatch.

00:00:10.

Only ten seconds, so not that bad.

"...Ezra ...?"

"Yep."

"You shouldn't have called," she says, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"Are they there with you?"

"Yes."

"I don't have much time," I say.

"Is it all true?" she asks, raising her voice.

"Yes."

00:00:23.

She takes a startled intake of breath. "Even ... even ... all the people you ... killed."

“Yeah.” As I admit my crimes to the woman I love, I can actually feel a weight being lifted from my shoulders. I’ve heard that expression before, but I thought it was just that, an expression. I never thought you could feel an actual weight being lifted.

“How could you?”

“I’m sorry, Tina, I’m really sorry.”

“Tell that to your victims,” she says, sounding on the verge of tears.

“No, I’m not sorry for killing them. They had it coming. They were scumbags,” I say. “I’m sorry for lying to you.”

00:00:40.

“I don’t even know what to say to that,” she says. “I don’t know who you are.”

“I’m the same person you fell in love with,” I say. “And weren’t you the one who said ‘I don’t think one’s career should consume them entirely’? Well, mine doesn’t.”

“I was talking about a normal job, not going around killing people!”

00:01:00.

“Tina, I don’t have a lot of time to argue with you.”

“Why?”

“I’ve got less than a minute left.”

“What’re you talkin’ ‘bout?”

“Tina,” I snap, “listen to me.”

00:01:11.

“Okay,” she mutters. “I’m listening.”

“I love you more than life itself,” I say. “You’re my soul mate. You’re my best friend. You make life worth living — and I’m sorry this sounds like a poorly written greeting card.”

00:01:22.

Silence. Like the line’s been cut. There’s no hum or the sound of her breathing.

“Are you still there?”

“I’m listening.”

“I’m sorry I lied to you,” I continue. “It tore me up inside. I don’t like keeping things from you. That’s not how it’s supposed to work.”

00:01:35.

“How’s it supposed to work, Ezra? Tell me. I’m dying to know.”

00:01:40.

“We share it all with each other, the good, the bad, and the ... the everything,” I say. “When you share your whole life with someone, you can’t pick and choose what to share, it has to be all of it.”

00:01:52.

“Ezra—”

“Tina,” I interrupt, “a rolling stone in love visits this city.”

There’s a pause on the line. I fear she didn’t hear me. I can feel my heartbeat in my ears, sounding like the beat of a bass drum.

“Huh?” Tina says.

Click.

I turn the phone off.

00:02:00.

Staring at the phone, I hope she figures out what I meant. I really do.

Getting up, I survey the park. There aren't any signs of law enforcement, and I'm sure not going to wait around to see if any arrives. Doing my best to not appear like I'm in a hurry, I walk out of the park, crossing over brown grass and patches of dirt. Stepping past a garbage can, I toss the cell phone into it, hearing the muffled plop as it lands on the pile of rubbish inside.

In my head, I repeat what Dirty Mike told me, over and over, like a mantra: "You make a plan, follow it, and the rest is outta yer hands. Doin' the job is job enough."

As I head across town, I think maybe I'm expecting too much, hoping she'll remember the first time we met.

Maybe she'll figure it out. The real question, of course, is what she'll do with that information if she even remembers that information. Will she fly to Rotterdam, or will she tell the feds what she knows?

Like Dirty Mike said: You make a plan and follow it. The rest is out of your hands.

Christopher E. Long lives in Southern California with his wife, Jamie, and son, Jackson. He's written everything from children books to adapting the '70s iconic porno "The Devil In Miss Jones" into a comic book. Warner Bros. recently optioned his comic book property, "Hiding In Time," which is being produced by Dan Lin (Terminator: Salvation). His comic books have been published by a variety of publishers, including Marvel Comics, IDW Publishing, and Image Comics.