

Carbon Speed Dating

The year was 2121. It had been only 9 months since the deadly meteor hit Earth, throwing off all of humanity. When the meteor impacted the Earth's surface, it cracked and released previously undiscovered chemicals, which were poisonous to mankind. It destroyed most of the ozone layer and raised sea levels drastically. Millions of people tragically lost their lives that day due to both the impact and toxic chemicals. Those who were able to escape had to barricade inside their homes, sealing off all windows, doors, and other openings so the poisonous gas wouldn't come in. Scientists rushed to develop new tools to help adapt to this new life, but they could not always keep up demand with the changing levels of toxic chemicals in the environment. There was so much gas that it wasn't safe to go outside unprepared or unarmed anymore. The scientists discovered that the meteor was still releasing poisonous gas and that destroying it would be an impossible and impractical task. There was not enough ammunition on the entire planet to destroy the meteor, and by their calculations, doing so would release so much toxic chemicals in the explosion that it would wipe out the entire population within minutes.

Humanity had to learn how to adapt to this new lifestyle. Scientists consulted with actuaries to develop a new life table, as the old one was rendered useless with the new living environment. They developed a supercomputer program to create new life tables based on the ever-changing levels of toxic gas. The gas changed levels about every 18 hours in a random increase or decrease pattern, similar to a random walk style, so the tables had to be recalculated often. These tables were also used to determine how dangerous it was to go outside. The scientists developed spacesuit-like hazmat gear to help adapt to the environment. However, since the levels of gas randomly increased and decreased each day, they could not develop a suit that could withstand all level changes. Therefore, the tables were needed to determine how useful the suits would be on a given day.

Because of the ever-changing levels of toxic gas, everyone was required to stay in their homes, and only leave as a last resort in order to decrease fatalities. Food and water supplies were delivered by the government on a weekly basis, so no grocery shopping was required. Since people were only allowed to stay in their households with whoever they lived with, they had to adapt to social constraints as well. People largely kept social over the internet, using video and holographic calls, but sometimes it just wasn't enough. People would sometimes meet in person, against government orders. Rogue scientists and other underground hackers developed secret apps to connect to the supercomputer servers to determine which days were least toxic and would plan meet ups. Soon the government caught on and started shutting down planned meetups. The rogue scientists and hackers started to take things

underground...literally. They started to host their meetings deep underground to prevent interception of communications. If people wanted to meet, they logged onto a foreign VPN network to obtain a secret password, location, and scheduled time for the underground meetup. These underground meetups took place beneath random buildings – libraries, butcher stores, abandoned bowling alleys, restaurants, and other businesses – and they were paid a fee to keep quiet to the government.

This movement birthed a new dating craze – carbon speed dating. Named dark-humorously after the situation of toxic gas chemicals, carbon speed dating referred to people meeting on a date in these underground locations. To keep suspicion low, people would only hold dates at these locations for 30 minutes or less to avoid having too many people at the location, possibly tipping off authorities.

One popular carbon speed dating location was inside “No-Name Coffee Shop”. On an unassuming Thursday evening, Tom Erickson enters No-Name with two goals in mind: grabbing a latte and finding someone to share it with. He heads to the counter and orders his regular: a caramel decaf latte (it’s after 6pm, after all). Tom frequented this place plenty of times, since it was around the corner from his apartment, but today was going to be something new. He pays for his drink and waits at the side of the barista counter to grab it. As he gazes across the room, he notices an unusually quiet crowd. He hears a bell ding and sees that his latte is finished at the pickup counter. He grabs it and then heads to the bathrooms. There are four doors in this back hallway – three single-use bathrooms and an employee-only entrance. He heads into the bathroom closest to the employee-only area, knocks, and opens the door when it’s clear. He turns on the lights and locks the door. He moves the trash can from the corner out of the way and notices a tile slightly larger than the others surrounding it. He steps on this tile, and the wall next to the toilet opens a hidden panel in the wall. Out pops an intimidating bouncer.

“Password and identification number,” the bouncer says abruptly.

“The eagle flies at dawn,” Tom replies. He pulls out his cell phone and displays a 6-digit pin from his carbon speed dating app.

“Go ahead. You have thirty minutes,” the bouncer replies. He steps aside to let Tom in and goes into the bathroom. He moves the trashcan back to its previous spot and unlocks the bathroom door for the next attendant. Tom descends the stairs, with the bouncer right behind him. The bouncer activates a switch on the wall, sealing off their secret world below.

Tom looks around in amazement. What lies below him is a cave-like underground replica of the coffee shop above. He descends the stone steps to the center and gazes around at the stone tables. He’s looking for a girl named Abby. He’s not sure what she looks like since they

haven't met, but she said she would wear a NASA sticker on the chest of her suit. He sighs, sits down at an empty table, and starts fidgeting with his phone.

A few minutes pass by. There's a tap on Tom's shoulder. He looks up and sees a NASA sticker on the space suit in front of him and looking closer he can see a short haired brunette with blue eyes through the spacesuit like helmet. "Abby?" he asks. "The one and only!" she replies. "Nice to finally meet you. Sorry I was late, I took a nap and slept through my alarm. The bouncer said we have about twenty minutes left. Let's get to know each other!" She sits down at the table and they talk nonstop for their remaining twenty minutes.

At the end of their date, the bouncer escorts them back upstairs. He instructs them to exit one at a time, a few minutes apart, so there is no suspicion. They agreed to meet up at the same time and place next week. Tom was smitten. Abby was everything he had ever wanted in a partner – they had the same interests and hobbies, and even grew up in neighboring small towns but had no mutual friends. He felt like he really connected with her, as if she was almost a copy of himself. He couldn't wait for their next date and couldn't stop thinking about her.

The next week, Tom arrived at the No-Name coffee shop with the same routine. He ordered his caramel latte and headed to the bathroom. He went to the last bathroom and locked the door. He moved the trash can and stepped on the secret tile to open the door. There was a different bouncer this time, but still large and intimidating. "Password and identification number," he asks. Tom pulls out his phone to flash the 6-digit code. "We ride at midnight," he answers. "Ok, you can enter. You have fifteen minutes," the bouncer replies. "Fifteen minutes?! That can't be right. Last time I had thirty!" Tom exclaims. "That's carbon speed dating here buddy. We continuously limit the times for you to hang out, so you don't attract attention to this business. If you really know you two click you can hang out in your own places." "B-b-but we live too far away from each other! We can't walk to each other in the suits, they won't withstand the power of the toxic chemicals! This is our place to meet in the middle!" Tom cries. "Look man, I don't know what to tell you, but your time is ticking. Go already," the bouncer shoos him down the stairs. Tom's heart dropped to his stomach as he descended the stairs. "I'm going to have almost no time with this girl!" Tom thought to himself. "I think she's perfect and I want to keep seeing her, but I don't know how it's going to work. We don't have any way to see each other..."

Tom looks around and sees Abby, and she waves him over to her table, which was the same table they sat at last time. "At least she's on time this time," he says to himself. He walks to the table and sits down. They immediately start talking about one of their favorite TV shows, but then Tom stops the conversation. "Sorry this has been bothering me for a few minutes, but I swear you had blue eyes when we met." "No...I've always had green eyes. Maybe it's the lighting in here?" Abby responds. "Hmm, I guess you're right," Tom acknowledges half-

heartedly. "I swear I never forget a face; how could I forget eye colors? Maybe she's right," he ponders to himself as Abby excitedly discusses her opinions on the latest episode.

After their fifteen minutes were up, the bouncer escorted them out. Tom and Abby had again planned to meet up again at the same time and same place the following week. As Tom walked home, he had a lot to think about. Tom was taken by her, but suspicious, conflicted, and confused. He wasn't sure how to handle having limited time with her with an end in sight; once their time at No-Name was up, where would they go from there? And why were her eyes a different color – they sat at the same table last week and her eyes definitely weren't the sea green color they were today. These questions clouded his thoughts and he felt like he was starting to overthink. He pushed those thoughts deep to the back of his mind and started walking home faster.

Another week passed and Tom arrived at No-Name for his and Abby's third date. Like clockwork, he ordered his caramel latte and headed to the last bathroom. He locked the door, pressed the secret tile, and started to prep his phone to show the bouncer. A new bouncer stepped out. "Password and identification number," he asks. "The dark side of the moon has no electricity," Tom answers, showing his 6-digit identification number. "Who even comes up with these weird sayings?!" Tom asks, annoyed. "I don't know buddy. You have seven and a half minutes." The bouncer lets him through. "Why am I not surprised," Tom sighs as he descends the stairs.

Abby is waiting for him at their same table. She's beaming with happiness as he sits down across from her. He's trying to keep a positive mindset, but these short dates are starting to wear him down a little. Was there an end in sight with them together? He looks at Abby and something is different. Her eyes look to be back to their blue color, and her suit is missing the NASA sticker. "I think I'm just going crazy. She's probably just wearing a different suit," Tom thinks to himself, and decides not to say anything to Abby about her appearance. Their time was short, and he didn't want to waste a moment of it. They talked about what their favorite hobbies were when times were normal. She talked about how much she loved hiking through the national parks, and he mentioned how he was such a big fan of fishing on quiet lakes.

The bouncer kicked them out again individually once their time was up. They had agreed to meet one more time next week. Tom knew what he had to do. He was going to start asking the serious questions, such as if they were going to get serious and what that meant going forward. He felt more confident walking home, but unquestionably a little nervous about what she would say.

Tom had a little trouble sleeping the next few nights. He kept tossing and turning, worried that Abby would say that she didn't want to see him after their dates. She was perfect

for him, and he hoped that she felt the same way. It almost felt unreal. Was it really this easy to find someone as perfect of a match as they were? Was he just not trying before? How do they cohabitate together? Do they move in together now or should they video call for a little before deciding? These thoughts haunted him until the day of their last date.

Tom woke up both excited and scared. He had mostly assured himself that she would probably say yes to a meetup of some sort. What that would look like, he was not sure. He was confident that she was on the same page as him, at least somewhat. He walked over to the counter to order his usual caramel latte and noticed that the barista today was the bouncer from his first encounter. He didn't want to blow either of their covers, so he interacted with him like he didn't know him. The barista also treated Tom as if they did not know each other. It's possible that the barista just didn't remember Tom. Tom grabbed his latte and headed to the bathroom for the usual routine. As expected, the bouncer was one Tom hadn't met before.

"Password and identification number," he asks. "All those who wander are not lost," Tom replies, pulling out his phone with his identification number. "Ok, you have three minutes and twenty-five seconds," the bouncer says. "Really? Down to the seconds now? You guys are really particular," Tom retorts. "Look pal, I don't make the rules alright? I'm just the bouncer," he shrugs off.

Tom starts to jog down the stairs. There's no time left to lose. He spots Abby immediately and runs over to her. "What's the rush?" Abby asks. "Listen, Abby. I like you a lot..." Tom trails off as he realizes that Abby's brunette hair has streaks of blonde in it. He also notices that one of her eyes is green and one is blue. "Actually Abby, I've got some questions and I need some answers. First off, what's going on with your eyes? Why are they changing colors? Why are they different?! And why is your hair changing colors?!" Tom starts to shout out. "Geez Tom, what's gotten into you? I'm not changing! There's nothing wrong with me!" Abby cries, and looks concerned. "Abby, your eyes are literally two colors and your hair is starting to change too. I just want to know I'm not crazy, but I seriously do think I am. If you've been changing how you look that's totally fine with me, but from the looks of your face and how you've acted I don't think you have. I just need you to confirm that you've been changing up your look, and that toxic gas isn't leaking into my suit making me crazy." Tom grabs Abby by her shoulders, and she looks at him, unsettled. "Tom, I seriously have no idea what you're talking about."

A hand rests on Tom's shoulders. He turns around to see the bouncer. "Your time's up, pal." "No way, there's no way that was only three minutes!" Tom counters, out of breath. "Abby, please tell me I'm not crazy," he begs Abby, literally shaking her. "Tom, I don't know what to tell you. I'm sorry," Abby sighs. "What do you mean?!" Tom shouts. "I...I..." Abby stutters. The room starts to get very bright. Tom shields his eyes.

Tom wakes up on a cold operating table. He's covered in wires from head to toe, with a weird helmet around his head. The bright light is still shining over him, so he can barely see. He hears unfamiliar voices all around him.

"I can't believe we messed this up. It was one simple person. What did you do?" an angry voice sternly questioned the room.

"Sorry Doctor Wilson, I swear I coded everything correctly. I don't know what went wrong," another voice quivered.

Tom starts to try to get off the table. "Hold him down!" a third voice shouts. Suddenly, three pairs of arms hold Tom down by his feet and arms. As his vision adjusts, he can see three people in white lab coats and protective glasses. "Where am I?" he asks. "Why can't you let go of me?!" He starts to squirm on the table.

"Tom, I'm terribly sorry, but we can't let you go," Doctor Wilson says. "See Tom, you are our experiment. By our calculations, the world as we know it *will* end, but hasn't yet. There *is* a deadly meteor on a collision course with Earth, but we're not sure when it will make impact. It's obviously nothing we have seen before, so we want to prepare. We've been working with actuaries, astrophysicists, biologists, geologists – you name it. Since we aren't quite sure what life will be like afterwards, we created this simulation. We want to know how society will react to this apocalyptic change into our planet. There are still some...kinks in our simulation..." Doctor Wilson trails off as he stares down a terrified colleague. "Nonetheless, we will adjust and try again."

"Try again? No, I want no part of this. How long was I in there? What year is it?" Tom exclaims as he tries to wrestle free from the grips of the other scientists.

"Nobody may answer his questions," Doctor Wilson warns.

"I need to know!" He winces in pain as he looks over to his left arm. A huge needle pierces his flesh, and the room starts to fade. Tom looks over to Doctor Wilson as he walks towards the table.

"Do not worry Tom," Doctor Wilson says, holding Tom's face. "All those who wander are not lost," he whispers.

"You..." Tom mutters as the room fades to black.