



## Season 1 Episode 1: Tasmanian Tiger

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A reclusive and introverted twentysomething remembers the college girlfriend who swept her off her feet. She stalks her on social media but then something seems wrong. Dead wrong.

*Content warning: Mental health; death of a loved one*

Link to the episode: <https://lab.sapienship.co/tasmanian-tiger/>

## Transcript

She's wearing the shirt even though it has a stain on it. She can't bring herself to give it up because it fits so comfortably. But if someone were to mention the stain, she isn't sure how she would explain it. "Something's spilled on your shirt, right there."

"Where? Oh, right... I hope it comes out!"

She is suddenly struck by the ridiculousness of this human instinct: that we feel uncomfortable when we have a stain or blemish on our clothes. Even if the mark was caused by soap so it's totally clean, we still feel embarrassed. She remembers her high school hiking trip with the 'Barefoot Walkers' group in the Joshua Tree National Park. She remembers sleeping outdoors – the great unspoiled outdoors, under the stars – and that nameless fear at the back of her neck, which only became bearable towards the early hours of the morning. She can still feel the desert dust that clung to her clothes and see the grime on the tour guide's face when he woke her. After a full day in the desert, this city girl's belief that the dusty soil under her feet was dirty began to crack and disintegrate.

Even so, she has not been on another hiking trip since.

She learned something on that trip. She managed to sense, for a few days anyway, her basic and animalistic survival instinct. She realized it had always been present, just under the surface but well hidden. The same survival instinct that's in all of us and would take over, at frightening speed, should some kind of catastrophe descend upon humanity. Even a small catastrophe. But that trip was a while ago and right now, her life is taking her in a whole other direction. When she was in college, she barely managed to muster the energy to attend classes. The constant effort it took to be around other people wore her out. But she had succeeded in masking it well. She had just missed the switch to distance learning because of the latest pandemic outbreak. She was sorry that it hadn't happened sooner, while she was still in college.

After college, she decided to embrace her true self, and she's now stopped making efforts to constantly socialize. She recognizes that she's most at ease, and feels most safe, when she's inside her own shell. Her own little room is all she needs. From here, in bed with her phone, she can connect with the world.

She listens over and over to No Exit's song "Hell Is Other People," trying not to think about the fact that some algorithm, somewhere, knows that she's looping the song again and again, and that she's written four comments, using a few of her favorite fake names, saying it's trash.

The same commercial comes on again. An unnecessarily loud voice says: "If you're twenty to twenty-five, now's the time to make some money without getting out of bed. Just click the link below." But she's also grateful—though she would never admit it—for this algorithm that knows everything about her. Because recently it told her, without being asked, that there is actually a syndrome called Avoidant Personality Disorder, and that it affects about 18.8 million people in the world. People just like her. The algorithm also taught her that she couldn't be living in a better time to have this condition. In this day and age she can still do anything she wants despite this diagnosis. She can be sociable and romantically fulfilled without ever opening her door. In the future, things will only get better—or so the pop-up ad tells her. Soon she will be able to take META-trips everywhere and anywhere, and she'll be wearing a stain-free, virtual shirt in an awesome, thrilling world. A mysterious world with no beginning and no end. "And here's the link to purchase your headset and download the app."

She has wanted to send this advertisement to her mom for a long time now, to make her understand that there are other people out there with the same problem. Her condition even has a name. She wonders if this might buy her some more time. Right now, her mom – who's from a different generation when people could still find and hold down steady jobs – helps her with a monthly allowance that she can use to pay back her student loans. She suddenly remembers AC.

They met in college, waiting in line to talk to one of their teaching assistants. They were both in a new course called A Brief History of Tomorrow. It was hard for her to ignore the rip that AC had in her shirt, right under her chest. AC noticed her quick glance at the tear and immediately said, with a big smile, that she could easily make up some story about how her shirt had just been torn a few minutes earlier. In truth, the hole had been there for weeks, but she couldn't possibly stop wearing the shirt.

"On an exhausting day," she said, "I even feel like maybe I could breathe through this hole."

After that day, they spent the whole of the following year together. It was the first time she had been in a relationship with someone like AC, who is such a deep thinker, yet so cheerful and full of life. The two of them went about creating a private world for themselves that was filled with passion and depth. But they were on borrowed time. She knew that when they finally graduated, AC would go on her separate way.

And now here she is, lying on her bed in her little room, deciding, after three years of an online rift, whether to peek at AC's feed. She feels she is strong enough to suffer a little pinprick to the heart.

She clicks.

She instantly finds herself looking at AC gazing into the screen, saying: "Guess what? I have two updates. I just finished listening to The Three-Body Problem audiobook. It was long, but definitely worth it, and... I've started to look for love again."

The post has attracted a lot of comments from AC's online friends:

T: "Miss you."

AC: "Me too. When are you coming to Evergreen?"

J: "Looking for love again? Weren't you always saying you were running away from it? You sure have changed."

AC: "Some of the changes have surprised me too. 😊"

S: "You were, and always will be, stunning."

AC: "Thanks. 😊"

R: "You're always in my heart."

AC: "You too!"

M: "Book?? Lately I feel that even a tweet is too long a read for you."

AC: "LOL."

She goes on scrolling down. AC has changed a little in the past three years. True, she still seems to support the 'Adopt Me' stray dogs association, but AC is chattier than she remembers, and a lot more active.

She can't help herself; she gives AC's post a heart.

A second later, she receives a DM.

"So great to be getting a sign of life suddenly. And a heart! From you! I imagine you're sitting in bed, surfing the web. Hope you're all good."

"It's been so long, AC. I'm excited. You keep doing stuff, while I keep curling up deeper into myself. I wanted to remember the good times we had for a second."

Just then, her phone rings. It's her mom, reminding her she'll be going to the Climate Refugee Relocation convention in two months, and she wants to stop by for a few hours on the way. She says she'll be there the day before the convention.

"Do me a favor and please write the date down somewhere. I don't want a repeat of what happened last time!"

They hang up and she returns to AC's message. She imagines what might happen if she clicks on the camera icon and they start chatting. She looks at the taskbar. Something isn't right.

She sees that instead of the camera icon and the phone icon there's a new one she doesn't recognize. A pink image of a striped Tasmanian tiger.

She hesitates, then clicks on it.

A page opens.

She reads.

AC. Deceased. Date: 06.23.2027. Seven months ago.

Beneath the date of AC's passing, in striped pink, are the camera and phone icons.

She can't even breathe.

She clicks on the camera icon.

Somewhere in the ether it rings.

And there she is. AC. Her face up on the screen, a little flushed with excitement.

"Hi, lover, I just knew I'd see you again," she says with that smile that is so familiar, "I really feel that this time it's forever..."

## Questions for reflection and discussion

The following questions can be used for a group activity (in a classroom or otherwise) or for personal reflection after listening to the episode.

1. Have you ever found yourself sitting for hours in bed scrolling through your social media feed, playing games or surfing the internet?
2. If it were you – would you have clicked on the “Tasmanian tiger” camera icon?
3. Do you find the ending of the story to be comforting? happy? sad?
4. While you are reading this question, someone, somewhere is most probably developing a “Tasmanian tiger” technology. Do you wish the “Tasmanian tiger” technology to be available for you to use? If your answer is yes, then who would you want to talk to?
5. What are the differences between talking to AI bots and real people?
6. Do you think it’s a good idea having AI bots of deceased people?
7. Would you want to work for a company that develops the Tasmanian tiger technology, or similar applications?
8. Do you think that social media helps the protagonist to better cope with her mental condition or does it make her condition worse? If it helps, then in what way? and if it makes things worse – how and why?
9. Is social media good for you? In what way do you find it helpful? In what way do you find it challenging?
10. Would you prefer to go on a real trip outdoors, or would you prefer to go on a virtual, immersive trip using a virtual-reality headset?
11. Is the Tasmanian tiger a real, existing animal? (Beware, this is a tricky question :)).
12. Is the Tasmanian tiger a tiger?
13. What could be the reason behind calling this application “Tasmanian tiger”?
14. The story hints at changes in the workplace, changes that you might be facing in the coming years. Can you find the paragraph that describes the change? What is it? How can we better cope with such a change?