

Eyes Wide OPEN

By Emily Schooley

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest Editor BRAD GARBER writes:

“Eyes Wide Open,” by Emily Schooley, is a futuristic love story. What? She opened the door? Why? Is this a new beginning? Is this murder, or is it love? So many questions to be answered by the next movie sequel.... This is a fun brain twister. Ok, she is a diplomat who returns to Earth after a successful peace negotiation with another denizen of the universe called, “The Others.” She fell in love with someone she should not have fallen in love with. “[P]erhaps we had been made from atoms of the same dying star, and our physical bodies carried that memory even when our minds could not recall the shared lifetimes that came before.” The relationship threatened something. The peace treaty? Her relationship with her own government? The mechanism of her heart? There is much intrigue here. It is a fun read and, at the end of it all, she “closed her eyes, and opened the door.” Perhaps, that was not really the end of it all. – Brad G. Garber (Spacing and font size is author’s own).

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

Even with my neurotransmitters on - I had been too tired to manually shut them off before the surges were pushed - I felt nothing but hollow inside. I felt the dopamine flood in, yes, but just like how our ancestors stopped finding coffee useful; the hormones did nothing to boost my mood. How could I be happy now, without you beside me?

Eyes Wide Open

I closed my eyes and opened the door.

I stepped out into Earth's atmosphere, my lungs quickly readjusting to the non-recycled air. Somehow, it tasted hollow despite the success of the mission. Cheers of joy surrounded me: my shuttle landing had been flawless, the peace treaties had been signed, war with the Others was no longer on the horizon. All because of us, they said. Our bravery. Our flawless teamwork, our quick thinking. Our synchronicity; that perhaps we had been made from atoms of the same dying star, and our physical bodies carried that memory even when our minds could not recall the shared lifetimes that came before. There was no other logical explanation for how we could have synced our energies so fast, coming together less than a year ago as perfect strangers.

--

It has been a day since your last transmission and now I am alone without you here.

They wanted sound-bites, of course, to immediately transmit to everyone's subdermal receivers. On the landing pad, microphones were shoved in my face before my eyes could even adjust to the sunlight. I gave them the answers we practised as they swarmed like ants around me. Finally, they returned to their hives, satisfied and gorged on information.

--

It has been a day and a half since your last transmission, and I wonder if it was all just a fever-dream caused by prolonged isolation. That would almost make more sense, wouldn't it?

After the press conference, I stole a few moments for myself in my office. They had kept it for me and everything was exactly as I had left it but the room now seemed foreign and hostile and far too cluttered after spending a month living in the pristine precision of the orbiting craft. I gathered what I needed to for the trip home and locked the door behind me.

--

It has been two days since your last transmission and I feel completely adrift in my isolation.

The night I returned, the Leaders had ordered bonus dopamine surges for everyone to enhance the experience of the sound-bites. Presumably, they wanted everyone to feel what they imagined I was feeling. Even with my neurotransmitters on - I had been too tired to manually shut them off before the surges were pushed - I felt nothing but hollow inside. I felt the dopamine flood in, yes, but just like how our ancestors stopped finding coffee useful; the hormones did nothing to boost my mood. How could I be happy now, without you beside me?

--

It has been five days since your last transmission and they do not suspect a thing.

If nothing else, all of my training had prepared me for what was now expected of me. There were grand dinners I was forced to attend, a friendly smile to be worn at all times. I got through them while making conversation and didn't even need to use the muscular enhancements in my cheeks.

Radiant, glowing, charming, a natural diplomat. Those were the words that flowed in my wake. If the Leaders suspected anything otherwise, they were too polite to say. Nobody showed up to haul me away for reconditioning, so I think I am safe now, at least from that. At a couple of the functions, some of the Others even made an appearance as a show of unity. Holographs were taken and broadcast into every home to celebrate and mark this singular point in history. Though I heard rumours through some of the backchannels that our synthesizers had trouble replicating the molecular structure of their banquet foods. I wonder if that would be cause enough for war, after all.

--

I am tired now. It has been a week since your last transmission.

My neural pathways are rebelling despite my failed attempts to reprogram them manually. This is taking all my effort. More and more, anything else I attempt to focus on is replaced by visions of your face when it rested inches from mine. I can only recall the slope of your closed eyelids, the angle of your cheek, the fine lines across your forehead and in the corners of your eyes. In those moments we spent curled together, I had felt as if your face would be the last thing I saw though I was much too afraid to tell you that aloud.

--

My body is failing me. It has been nine days since your last transmission and I don't know how much longer I can endure this.

The Leaders have ordered me placed under observation and so I float alone in this transparent tank as the world blurs around me. Everything organic in me is rejecting all of the upgrades that I have spent years collecting. This body was supposed to become a thing of mastery, a thing of beauty, and instead it has become ugly and useless. I cannot recall, cannot feel anything now other than the phantom sensation of your heat radiating alongside my own. The gentle pressure that came with the weight of your arms anchoring me in place on your chest. My receivers have shut themselves off, and my eardrums echo with only the ghost of that soft voice you used when we were alone together, the way you bent your words so that only so that I would hear. You will haunt me until I die.

What they do not deserve to know - or perhaps what I do not want to burden them with - is the repercussion of what happens when two of us sync so closely, the way that we did. Eventually dying stars all must collapse inward on themselves. Sooner or later it will happen to every pairing though there is no guarantee as to when. Some lucky few might get years together, but not us.

I am still not sure which one of us moved first when we felt that shift - whether you chose to sacrifice yourself for my sake or whether I was truly selfish until the end.

In mere moments we went from sharing a private universe while we lay entwined to that awful barrier stretching between us for the last time. Me, safe in the orbiting craft, and you, as stoic as ever, as you looked away from my eyes, on the wrong side of the airlock. At least your death would come relatively quickly in the endless black vacuum of space.

So, I closed my eyes and opened the door.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

1/11/2019 – the seeds of this story were first planted, in a quiet hotel room in Tokyo.

The Japanese have a particular expression when it comes to love and soulmates – that two people who are destined to be together are “connected by the red thread of fate.”

Personally, I find the idea of soulmates equally comforting and cruel, regardless of the nature of the relationship: sexual, romantic, platonic, or something else entirely. The idea of being perpetually bound to another person often feels more like an obligation than a balm against loneliness; it makes my skin itch and it makes me want to run far away from anything that might shackle me to a particular person, place, or time.

Even without meaning to, we humans are often so selfish and self-interested. As much as we want to believe that we are ‘advanced’ and/or ‘civilized’ ... ultimately, we are still incredibly driven by our lizard brains. We fight, fuck, freeze, or fawn when confronted with chaos (or perhaps a combination thereof). Honestly, I don’t think we will ever fully outgrow those base impulses no matter how far we evolve as a species; as long as there is organic brain tissue, we will be somehow tethered to our ancestors’ framework for navigating the world.

We reach for the stars, but simultaneously, our instincts want to keep us safe and small. Brains are so funny like that.

*Of course we want to become ‘better’ ... but we are still finding our way to what, precisely, that means, both individually and as a now-global society. Consider *Eyes Open* mulch for the future.*

And yet... there are a small handful of people that I would absolutely, unselfishly drive hundreds of kilometers for. Even at the last minute, or in the middle of the night. And for nothing more than to experience the weight of my name in their mouth, or to know that my hand in theirs made their day a little more bearable.

Ultimately, this story is for C- and G-, and for K-: anata dake; for you three, the k word; the unspeakable one that stretches beyond a single lifetime.

And also, this story is partially inspired by P.W., who writes the precise hard sci-fi that I always want to read. Thanks for remaining a peculiar sort of touchstone, between our shared interest in cephalopods, feral cats, and challenging lived narratives. (No dick jokes this time, though.)

AUTHOR'S BIO: Emily Schooley is a feral cat in a human body who tells stories for rebels and outcasts, using whatever medium she can get her claws into. Several of her nine lives are spent as an actor and emerging filmmaker, creating work for stages and screens of all sizes. To help support her work, join her over on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/EmilySchooley>

EDITOR'S BIO: Brad has degrees in biology, chemistry and law. He writes, paints, draws, photographs, hunts for mushrooms and snakes, and runs around naked in the Great Northwest. Since 1991, he has published poetry, essays and weird stuff in such publications as *Edge Literary Journal*, *Pure Slush*, *Front Range Review*, *Tulip Tree Publishing*, *Sugar Mule*, *Third Wednesday*, *Barrow Street*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, *Barzakh Magazine*, *Ginosko Journal*, *Junto Magazine*, *Slab*, *Panoplyzine*, *Split Rock Review*, *Smoky Blue Literary Magazine*, *The Offbeat* and other quality

publications. 2011, 2013 & 2018 Pushcart Prize nominee. His story **Journal to Mars** was published in Issue 5.