

Star of Epsilon

By Eric Brown.

Paris was in again, a hundred years on: '68 found me on the left bank, playing to crowds in the Blue Shift slouchbar. I blitzed 'em with cosmic visions. I sub-circuited direct, employed slo-mo, ra-ta-tat shots, even visual cut-ups, in homage. Goddard and Burroughs were back in, too. Had to do with nostalgia, the harking back to supposedly better times. Hell... Didn't I know that? Wasn't I cashing in on the fact that we all love to live a lie? Wasn't I giving the crowds what they wanted 'cos they'd never get it otherwise?

I met her after a night performance.

The Blue Shift was the scene that month.

It wasn't just the drugs they pumped but the live acts, I liked to think. I alternated nights with a cute fifteen year-old sado-masochist on sensitized feedback. It wasn't my kick, but off-nights I'd sneak downstairs and jack-in. And jack-out again, fast. Three minutes was all I could take of this kid - my opposition. The management had it sussed. They played us counterpoint: one night this weird little girl giving out intimations of death and id-grislies like no kid should, and the next old Abe Santana with his visions of Nirvana-thru-flux, the glories of the space-lanes.

The girl intrigued me. The neon-glitz out front billed her as Jo, and that was enough to pull the freaks. Her act was simple. On stage a sudden spotlight found a small cross-legged figure in a pierrot suit, white-powdered face a paragon of melancholy complete with stylized tear. She'd come on easy at first, slipping fear sub-lim at the slouched crowd. Her head was shaven, but a tangle of leads snaking from her cortical-implant gave her the aspect of a par-shorn Medusa. The leads went down inside her suit and into the stage, coming out by the cushions. Freaks jacked-in and got fear first, subtle unease. Then the kid shifted her position, sitting now with outstretched legs together, arms stanchioned behind her, palms down. The nursery pose contradicted the horror coming down the leads, the hindbrain terror of mortality. She tapped into us and found our fear of death and gave it back, redoubled - turning us to stone.

First time I jacked-in I wondered how she did this, what magic she worked to show us that which we tried to deny, even to ourselves. So the next night I stayed with it a while longer, and I found out. Little Jo was dying. She was fifteen and she'd never see sixteen and the gut-kick I experienced when I realised this was zero compared with her angst. That's when I jacked-out, sickened, left and got loaded and tried to forget.

Over the next few weeks I was lured back again and again. I knew what I wanted: not the orgasm of terror the rest of the crowd got high on, but the futile reassurance that Jo was not really dying, that her performance was just a death-analogue recorded from some terminal patient, encoded on Jo's computer and used cynically to thrill.

But the more I experienced her act, the more I knew I was dreaming. Jo was dying, okay. She gave out death and when the audience were convinced that they were dying she reversed the feed and drank it back, and you could almost hear the gasp of her soul as its need was quenched. The kid's in love with death, I told myself, as if hoping this might ease my heartache: perhaps, if she was, then I could pity her a little less...

Then one time I stayed in for ten minutes, and I found out the truth. The only reason she reversed the feed was to take from the crowd the knowledge that they too would some day die, to reassure herself that she was not alone in the dying process we all call living.

That ten minutes was the last I took. I avoided the club on my nights off. I couldn't go near the place, and those freaks in there - I thought many a time over a drink in some darkened, nondescript bar - they stayed jacked-in for hours! And that brought me back to what I was running from, the fear of death and the terrible realization that Jo was plugged into that weltschmerz for the rest of her life...

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And my act?

How many of the crowd who freaked out on Jo's act came to mine? Their diametric content would suggest none, but I hoped some people needed antidote.

I'd start simple. I'd give them the experience of an Engineman emerging from the flux; the elusive ghost of rapture that haunted his mind; the drone of auxiliary burners; the knowledge that we were lighting into the Nilakantha Stardrift on a mission of rescue. Then I'd hold this sensory input under and come in with the voice-over: "Fifty years ago I mind-pushed bigships for the Canterbury Line..."

I'd take them at hyper-c through the Nada-continuum, coming out places they'd only dreamed about or seen in travel brochures. Black holes were a favourite, and I took them on a tour of a giant nicknamed Calcutta, courting disaster on the hazardous event horizon, the bigship a surfer on the math of Einstein-Fernandez physics. Then I'd sling the 'ship at a blistering tangent off across uncharted space, on the trail of new and more wondrous adventure... The main theme was always wonder - the hint of Nirvana that every Engineman experiences in the flux.

My customers left satisfied, uplifted.

Then one night after her performance Jo was stretchered off comatose, and I didn't know whether to feel relief that at last she had died, or sadness at the passing of someone I had hardly known. Later the manager told me that Jo was fine, she'd recover. Would I fill in for her this week? And I said yes, relieved that I might have the opportunity to get to know her, after all, and hating myself because of that.

We're quark-harvesting a long, long way from Earth. I step from the flux-tank, as we are coasting now. I look through the viewscreen, behold the sweeping sickle sponsons reaping fiery quarks. The 'aft scene is even more spectacular, a panoramic miracle. The converted energy is fired from the bigship in blinding c-velocity bolts, streaking away on a multi-billion light year bend that describes the inner curve of the universe. And I'm moved almost to tears, along with my audience, though for different reasons.

For a long time after the performance I sat yogi-fashion. The crowd cheered and applauded, then moved back to the bar or out into the night. And I was ashamed, like a preacher who has convinced his congregation but does not himself believe.

Technicians dismantled the rig, unplugged me and wound in the leads. A few tourists tried to get to me, to say how much they'd enjoyed the performance. They were stopped by the heavies, who knew how low I felt after my act.

The club never closed, but trade hit a low around four in the morning. I was still there then, in the darkness of the stage, thinking back and regretting the events of all those years ago, the pretence of the present. A few junkies slouched at the bar, getting their fix jugularwise.

As I sat, a kid crawled from a cushioned bunker between the bar and the stage. She headed my way on all fours, galumphing over cushions and the wraparound membranes in the floor. I assumed she was a fan who wanted to rap about how it was to flux on the bigships...

She climbed aboard the stage and sat before me cross-legged, like a mirror-image of myself. She had long black hair, too luxuriant for a kid her age, too sensual.

"I loved your performance," she said in a husky voice which, like her hair, belonged to a thirty year-old.

She had a triangular, coffee-brown face and large green eyes. She should have been a nice-looking kid, but there was some disunity in the planes of her cheeks which made her almost ugly.

"Hey," I said, weary. "Go home. Get some sleep."

A flash of emerald anger. "I said I liked your show."

"And I said-"

"Abe," she smiled, serious. "I know you want to flux again..."

I looked at her, guarded. She had it wrong, but only just.

So I said, "How...?"

She grinned at me. "I experienced your show good, Abe. Your need was in there. Those fools might not have read it, but I did."

Then I saw the teflon protuberance at the base of her skull. I lifted a tress of hair, fingered sockets worn smooth through use.

"Who are you?" I whispered.

"I'm just another German-Turk from Dusseldorf," she shrugged, "with a taste for sick theatrics."

I smiled and shook my head.

"You still don't recognize? How about if I wore a pierrot suit and a big tear," she said, "here."

"Jo?"

"Jodie Schimmelmann."

I felt a tremor inside. This was the kid who'd rocked me with haunting visions of death. She was fifteen years-old and she'd stared oblivion in the face and she was still here.

I'd be ninety in a month and I felt a burning sense of shame at the injustice.

"I need your help," she said.

I shook my head. "How can I possibly help you?"

So she told me why she was dying.

Until six months ago Jodie worked in the spaceyards at Orly. She was a flux-monkey, an engineer whose job it was to crawl inside the exhaust ventricles of bigships and carry out repairs on the auxiliary burners. It was hard work, but she didn't complain; she lived well and saved enough creds to send home to her mother in Germany.

Then one check-up she was found to have contracted some complicated virus that had lodged as spores in the flux-vent of a bigship she had worked on. She was given a year to live, paid off and discharged. Jodie was rotting inside with some alien analogue of carcinoma that had attacked her marrow, lymph glands, lungs and trachea... It was a miracle she was still alive and active, but she loaded herself with analgesics every day and went on fighting.

The disease explained her voice, of course, and the fact that she wore a wig. Ironic that that which was killing her also gave her the appearance of someone much older, while in her head she had matured as well.

I said, "Isn't there a cure?"

"Yeah, sure there is. But a cure costs creds, Abe. And not even my pay off was enough."

I recalled her words. "How can I help you?"

"I need creds. I want the cure. I also want to be beautiful-"

I laughed.

Then she realised how funny that was and she laughed too.

"See that beautiful woman at the bar?" she asked. "The one zonked on jugular-juice and out of it."

"So?"

"So she's dead ugly - honest."

"I thought you just said she was beautiful?"

Jo smiled, "You ever seen here before?"

"She doesn't come in here when I'm on. I'd recognize her."

"Yeah? Ever noticed an old woman, maybe a hundred and fifty? All bags and wrinkles? It's the same woman. She has the latest sub-dermal capillary electro-cosmetics. What you see there is a clever light show, a laser display to deceive the eye into beholding beauty. I want one."

"But you aren't ugly, Jo."

"I'm not beautiful."

"So you want me to get you the creds to buy this device?" I said. I thought I saw her logic.

She was almost as terrified by her physical deterioration as she was by the thought of death, and she wanted to die looking good.

She nodded. "That and a cure. I want to live, and I want looks. Think I'm greedy?"

I shrugged. "Why live a lie?" I asked her, hypocritical.

"I want both, and you can help me get them."

So I asked, "How?"

"I've got a ship I want you to flux," she said simply.

Why live a lie? I had asked.

Sure I live a lie...

"Tell me about it," I said.

So Jo took me to the Louvre.

I protested that art wasn't my kick, but she insisted. When I tried to find out what she had planned, she clammed up. She stomped along the boulevard, pulling me after her. We made an odd couple, even among countless odd couples. She wore callipers to assist her wasted leg muscles, unadorned leg-irons without automation.

It was nighttime in Paris that month, a time for punks and freaks and assorted nocturnals to live it up beneath the darkened dome. Next month it would be Spring daylight for a stretch, and Gay Paree would cater to water-colourists and crystal artists and young lovers.

We did the Louvre.

We saw the Mona Lisa and a hundred other art treasures of Earth. Then we strolled around the hall of alien artifacts and came at last to the Chamber of Light, a circular room containing the Star of Epsilon VII. Jo just stared, open-mouthed.

The diamond burned as bright as any primary, filling the chamber with golden light. It stood on a pedestal, protected by a hexagon of high-powered lasers.

"Do you know it's story?" Jo whispered. "They call it the 'Healing Stone'."

A hundred years ago, at the infancy of starflight... An expedition to the Lyra in Beta cluster... The bigship made touchdown on a new world, an Earth-norm planet never before explored. The spacers mapped and charted and came up with another world fit for human colonisation, and lifted off. And after three days in space the crew came down with a potentially lethal viral infection, and they re-routed to the nearest Terran base with adequate medical facilities to deal with the hundred-plus dying spacers... And the ship hit trouble, crashlanded on Epsilon VII, uncharted and hostile, light years from anywhere and months away from help... So the crew set to work concocting a cure from the resources at hand on the planet... And on the day that a boosted-monkey found a giant diamond, the Star of Epsilon, the drugs administered to the dying crew began to take effect... And they pulled through with no casualties... And the spacers, a superstitious lot at the best of times, put it down to the luck of the largest diamond ever discovered.

The Healing Stone.

"Do you believe that?" I asked Jo.

She smiled. "Do you?"

We drank champagne on a patio overlooking the Seine, and Jodie told me of her dream.

"How long have you had it planned?" I asked.

"Oh... well before they paid me off. I knew I was dying, that I had to have the creds."

"Then why the cabaret?"

"I need the feedback, the knowledge that sooner or later all those fuckers are going with me. Of course, if it works..." She smiled at me. "Abe... do you believe in happy endings?"

I just smiled at her, unable to reply.

She finished her champagne. "C'mon. It's time we were getting there..." And as she rose clumsily from the table I noticed that she was shaking with fear and anticipation and pain.

I wanted to tell her, then - I wanted nothing more than to tell her the truth. I was desperate two months back, before the Paris run.

I contacted my agent. "I need more material! My repertoire's getting stale, all the same old stuff. The competition has everything I've got, and more-"

"I thought you had that black hole original, the Calcutta show?"

I sighed. "I have. It's original now, but how long will that last? How long before someone finds an Engineman willing to sell another event horizon fly-by?"

"So what do you suggest?"

I told him. He said he'd be in touch, and rang off. I spent a tense hour in my room above the club, dreaming of far stars. Then the vid chimed and I dived at it.

"I've found him," he said. "The rest is up to you." And he gave me the address.

The Engineman emeritus received me in his penthouse suite. A big wall-window overlooked a darkened Paris and valuable starscapes adorned the walls.

He wore charisma that scintillated like silver lamé. He was a tall, grizzled African in his early eighties, muscular still despite his age, his years in flux.

"Your agent called. What he proposed I find quite novel. I've never heard of it before."

"It's common," I told him. "The process has been around for years. Space is especially popular now - people need what they've never had."

He poured stiff drinks and we sat on foamforms before the view.

"You pushed a bigship for the Cincinnati Line," I said.

He smiled in recollection. "The bigship Hanumati on ten year runs to the farthest reaches of the Out-there."

"They say the flux is ecstasy," I said.

He chuckled. "Ecstasy? More like Heaven, man..." And he described the sensation as best he could.

Then he stopped and looked at me. "Your agent said you wanted to buy the Hanumati run?"

"I'd like to make an analogue for my show. I'd be able to pay you fifty thousand creds-"

"I don't want your creds!" he snapped. "What do you think creds mean to me?"

"But I couldn't possibly-"

"I'll give you the run," he said. "Or you don't get it at all..."

I had brought along a holdall full of jacks and leads and monitoring equipment.

He jacked the leads into his occipital computer and bled images and sensations of the Hanumati run into the monitor. I edited it, strung together the highlights, then interfaced and downloaded the synthesis into my occipital. As always, the analogue didn't include the experience of fluxing - that was impossible, something only Enginemen could get in situ - but the rest of the analogue was pure high-powered wonder. The data detonated my synapses in a series of explosions until my cerebellum nova'd.

I couldn't recall leaving. I staggered through the nighttime streets in a daze. When I made it to my room I collapsed in my cot, blasted. I was on a high for twenty-four hours, then came down slow on waves of self-pity and regret.

Orly spaceport...

It took me back a hundred years. As a kid I'd watched wide-eyed, fingers hooked through the diamond mesh, as the Bigships trundled home from interstellar runs. And I'd dreamed...

It was a long time to wait for a dream to come true. But, as this dream was likely to be a nightmare, perhaps that was just as well.

Jo had the fence pre-cut, and we crawled through quick, the snipped wire clawing at our clothing. Once inside Jo clank-stomped, stiff-legged, towards a parked mini-roller, and I limped after her. We climbed aboard, Jo took the controls and we jolted off across the lighted tarmac. We passed through the inner fence under the bored gaze of a security guard, who waved us through when Jo flashed her old authorisation pass. We trundled towards a hangar and Jo brought us to a halt outside.

She was about to climb down when I caught her arm. "Jo - I don't think-"

She glared at me. "You can't back out now, Abe! You promised-"

So I swallowed my protest and climbed down after her.

She ran clumsily to the vast, sliding doors, plugged a lead into her implant and jacked into the lock's computer socket. She closed her eyes, summoning codes, and the door clicked and rolled open a metre. We slipped inside.

"The Pride of Baghdad," Jo told me, playing a flashlight over the squat bulk of an old Smallship. "Ex-Iraqi space fleet. They sold it to Europe for scrap, but there's one more run in the old tub yet."

We climbed a welded ladder and Jo used her lead again on the hatch. It sprang open and the interior of the Baghdad lit up, exuding the aroma of stale sweat and flux.

We dropped into the engineroom.

"You know how to pilot this crate?" I asked, delaying the inevitable.

"I worked on the Baghdad last job," she told me. "I shunted her across the 'port once or twice. I know how to pilot her. I got everything measured down to the last centimetre." She looked at me. "What you waiting for, Abe?" She had discarded her wig along the way and, bald, she looked thinner and more vulnerable than ever.

I paused by the sen-dep tank that I had experienced only in the memories of other men. I lifted the hatch and stared at the slide-bed, the complication of leads.

"Abe...?"

In a whisper: "I've never fluxed before, Jo. I can't do it..."

Her expression was more than just horrified. She seemed to die before me, to age. She slumped, a hand going to the tank for support.

Her voice trembled with the imminence of tears. "But... but I jacked into your performance, Abe. I could feel your need to flux..."

"The performance was just that, Jo. A performance. I used analogues, cerebral recollections from real Enginemen and spacers. My need to flux was just a futile yearning to do what I'd never done, but had always wanted to do."

Jo just shook her head. "Abe...?"

"I was turned down by the Rousseau Line when I was twenty-one," I said. "So I took up cabaret. It was the only way I could experience starflight, convince people that I'd once been a spacer... Sometimes I even managed to convince myself that I'd been up there."

"Can't you do it just this once, Abe?" She was in tears. "Just for me?"

I stared at the tank. "That's one thing I never experienced," I said, more to myself than to Jo. "Even in analogue. The actual experience of flux can't be reproduced. Enginemen say it's almost religious, a foretaste of Nirvana. I've tried to simulate it in my shows, but I don't really know what it's like..."

"Why can't you do it, Abe!" Jo yelled at me. "What do you fear?"

"I might not survive, Jo," I lied. "It might kill me." But what I feared was far, far worse than this.

"Abe - it might save me!"

So then, reluctantly, I slipped into the slide-bed and jacked-in, like I'd done a thousand times

before in analogue. Sobbing with tears of relief now, Jo leaned all her weight against the 'bed and pushed it home. She slammed the hatch shut and total darkness encapsulated me, then silence. The ship's computer slipped anaesthetic into my head and soon all physical feeling departed, too. I sensed a quick, blurred vibration as Jo, up in the pilot's berth, fired the burners.

Then I fluxed.

What I feared, of course, was that the promise of Nirvana-thru-flux would turn out to be no more than a myth - a romantic fabrication to enhance the mystique of the Enginemen. For so long I had lived with the hope that Nirvana was real, the ultimate state at which each one of us eventually arrived. I was an old man with not long left, and to have experienced nothing in the flux would have destroyed me.

I sensed a strange timelessness to begin with, and I was still aware of myself as a single human entity. And then... something happened. I was no longer myself, no longer human, but part of something larger and infinite. I had a vast understanding of everything - I was everything - and the petty human concerns that had filled my life to date were revealed for what they were. I had often wondered at the faraway attitudes of the many Enginemen I had met, and now I understood the reason for their aloof otherness: how could anyone be the same, or like any other human being, after experiencing this? With one part of my mind I knew that The Pride of Baghdad no longer existed in the real and physical universe; we were surging through the nada-continuum now, on a mission to save the life of Jodie Schimelmann.

After what seemed like an eternity, though in fact was a matter of minutes only, the sensation of physicality returned to me. I felt hands on me and I was pulled upright and dragged forward, and all I could think of was the ecstasy of the union in the flux. I could see nothing, hear nothing, and I was aware only of my bodily progress from the ship and out on to what seemed to be sand. I felt the warmth of sunlight on my skin and collapsed.

I came to my senses again and again, and always Jo was kneeling beside me, smiling, trying to impress upon me the success of the venture.

Then I came fully to my senses and elbowed myself into a sitting position. I looked around. I was on a beach, an endless golden crescent with the blue sea metres away. The Pride of Baghdad was buried in a dune behind me, and only the hatch was visible like the entrance to some mysterious underground kingdom.

I called out and seconds later Jo emerged from the ship and closed the hatch behind her. "Abe! You're okay?"

"I've never felt better," I said, touched by her concern. "Where are we?"

"Brazil, Abe. Ten kays south of Rio."

She passed me a vid-board, tuned to world news. The headlines ran: 'Louvre raided... The Star of Epsilon missing... Chamber of Light destroyed in mysterious raid...'

She held out the diamond. "You did it, Abe. You saved my life."

I wanted to tell her that there was nothing to fear from death - that, after life, something more wondrous and magical awaited us. But how could I tell her that?

Jo was a young girl with all her life ahead of her, and I was an old man at the end of mine.

"Okay," I said, "let's get you into a hospital."

"And you?"

Me? First, I'd get the occipital computer wiped clean of all the dreams of space that belonged to other men. I had my own experience of flux now, and I no longer needed analogues.

Jo pulled me to my feet and we left The Pride of Baghdad and set off along the road to Rio.