



TARA

PHIL LEWIS

TARA

A MIRROR NOVEL

by Phil Lewis

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PHIL LEWIS

I started writing short stories when I was about ten. Yes...they were about robots and space ships. I loved the plots, twists and turns, enjoying the writing and then the reading of them.

I have always been creative, earning my living as an illustrator and designer – but always continued writing as a hobby.

Now I am retired, I can look back on my extensive collection of novels, plays and short stories and try to do something with them – hence my website (<http://www.phil-lewis.net/publications/ebooks.htm>) to which I will be adding anything worth reading over the course of the next few years.

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Tara's Story – A MIRROR NOVEL

By Phil Lewis

A SNIFF

Sleep came easily. Her blood was slowly diluted with Palcium B. Reducing her heart rate so low, it took a sophisticated machine to register it. The rest of her vital organs were compromised in their various ways with Teraton, Mangladese concentrates and, when absolutely necessary, Sophium. Her body slowed down its metabolism, until it reached the required level. From now on the fluids would be carefully monitored and controlled. Each element of the body's cells monitored and controlled by microscopic computers.

Tara Reece was in the Deep Sleep, her physical body cocooned in the metal, plastic and liquid sarcophagus. Alone, in the dark, her body slept.

Thin optic-venial probes remained imbedded in two hundred and twenty-two areas of her body. They drew measured amounts of fluid and replaced them with artificial chemicals. The body would know no difference, other than it was always feeling healthy. Muscular mass was stimulated by electrical impulses on a fluctuating time scale. Slowing their deterioration rate and stimulating the blood flow as necessary. Nail growth was reduced by venial extraction of measured traces of calcium, and three other minute elements of the woman's particular physical composition. Her menstrual cycle was slowed and, to all intents and purposes, eliminated.

At the base of her neck a large optical-neuron tap was grafted. This connection allowed the monitoring and controlling of the whole of the response areas of her body. More important, it was directly linked to her brain, monitoring and controlling nearly all the brain's activity. The other end of the tap was directly wired into the main computer.

For the long duration of this flight, the designers had thought the most practical way would be to disseminate the traveller's mind from the body. In Tara's brain, the basal ganglia, regions of the forebrain, received the motor neurones from parts of the cortex, passing on impulses to the reticular formation. One of the functions was to provide inhibitory stimuli for the antagonistic control of muscle tone during slow movements. The computer monitored these functions and now replaced the human subconscious control.

The majority of sensory neurones carrying impulses to the cortex terminate in the thalamus. Here, the impulses are analysed and relayed to the appropriate sensory areas of the cortex, by neurones originating in the thalamus. This area is involved in the human perception of pain and pleasure. It acts as a processing, integrating and relay centre for all sensory information - like a switchboard in a past times telephone exchange. The thalamus is directly connected to, and controlled by, the Devon Corporation CoreTex implant.

The hypothalamus is the main co-ordinating and control centre for the autonomic nervous system. It receives sensory neurones from all the visceral, taste and smell receptors. It is used in the regulation and control of heart rate, blood pressure, ventilation rate and peristalsis. It initiates feeding, drinking and sleeping. Also, behavioural activities. In particular, aggression and reproduction. It monitors the metabolite and hormone levels of the blood as well as blood temperature. The pituitary gland, situated immediately beneath it, directs and controls the release of most of the hormones from the body and maintains the steady-state composition of the blood and tissues. This too was by-passed by synthetic neurone carriers and directly connected to the main computer.

The cerebrospinal fluid, contained in the central canal of the spinal cord, bathes the inside and the outside of the brain. Blood vessels lie within it for the supply of nutrients and oxygen to the nervous tissues and the removal of wastes. Ultra thin tubes penetrated two hundred and twenty-six areas, supplying the correct dosage of artificial CSF.

Tara's body was encased in ParaFoam, which allowed the skin to breathe normally while being preserved and nurtured. Air was circulated around the restricted area, extracted, processed and recycled again. The air pocket was large enough for the full expansion of her chest, but little more. The ParaFoam was contained in the first of several homodermal casings. This fitted the body precisely. Embedded in this first casing were over two thousand small thermaluid monitors and stimulating probes. These in turn passed through the three outer homodermal casings and were connected to the outer, coffin shaped, monocasing. The final bodily connection was to the seven metre long omni junction. After that it was the domain of Aphrodite, the Fluideom computer. The total mass of Aphrodite was dispersed in two thousand, three hundred and forty separate areas. Each connected by three separate Opteom connection systems. Information travelled in both directions faster than any human being had previously anticipated non-physical movement. All this speed was wasted on Tara

Reece, as she was sleep. She'd been asleep for twenty-five years, five months, four days, ten hours and twenty-four minutes. Precisely.

Fluids were subtly changed and small stimulating pulses made the neural cortex active. Tara Reece was being awakened.

402023309002108003201023070065456400540054065404606064

(I have found something for you. Time to wake up.)

Tara watched in her mind's eye as five pieces of the outside of the ship appeared to break away from the larger structure. They hung in space for three seconds before small gusts of gasses showed from their squared-off ends. They moved gracefully in a programmed arc that would take them to the planet's surface.

They were designed to endure anything with which unknown worlds could throw at them. Extreme heat and cold, polluted atmospheres, or caustic rain. The outside surfaces glowed in the heat of the light atmosphere. The buffeting on the hull was minimal. All the sensors remained working, as the five probes slid into the lower strata of the atmosphere.

Tara chose one probe and concentrated on its progress. It slowed its decent in a violent braking motion and grounded to a halt. The optical equipment just showed a swirling ochre mist. Visibility was less than a metre. Tara switched to a series of colour band monitors and found that infrared gave the best view of this planet's surface. It looked flat and depressing. Tara watched their progress and noted the peculiar colour of the moistened air. The telltales recorded every change in compound and temperature. These would be analysed in detail later. A mind-numbing job, she was pleased that Aphrodite would undertake on her own.

32012032102302102302102302102302

(Analysis commenced)

A mass of information was being broadcast back to the mother ship. Aphrodite recorded it all and waited patiently for the sequence to finish. Tara panned the visual around for a full sweep of the surface. It looked identical, whichever way she looked at it. It was very flat and looked dusty. She completed the sweep and waited.

1023201230210233021022302102320120322

(Analysis completed)

024531648120100012100210

(Get the probes back.)

0132012015201236500860

(Confirmed.)

Tara saw the ground fall away as the probe powered itself away from the small gravity effect. She watched the skies clear into the black of space and saw the host craft ahead. Its bulky and unstreamlined structure belied the technology it held. The probe cruised closer. It slowed, docking itself to the side. Clamps locked it in place and connectors interfaced. Information continued to flow, as Aphrodite began to study the results.

32012032102302102302102302102302

(Analysis commenced)

Tara let her mind slip into another level. She held her thoughts there, in an attempt to pass the time away. It was a well-proven fact that the human mind, if left with nothing to do, will invent unreal scenarios that would appear real to the host. This was the path to madness. All deep space travellers were genetically restructured to avoid this most human of pitfalls - too much time to think. Tara had no idea of time and allowed Aphrodite to control the overall progress of the journey. Some time later, Aphrodite contacted her again.

1023201230210233021022302102320120322

(Analysis completed)

020103012504142025

(Anything?)

01020120120302050801702207106902660302180158205500540120120012020485003900545458001583004520150045500

Negative. There are no life forms of any description here. Sorry, Tara, waste of time.

013640230400340030136013023100300

(Oh, dear. What next?)

0120020154500150012369410265840022462102358400363581002241002520

I have a sniff of something. Should take only a year or two. Agreed?

0024003040214004002014301

(Whatever you say)

0120020026520125402698000210323210023100524003698400331102358700237103234012364100356410
1201892026398400248200452

(Starting the DeepSleep sequence now. Any particular dream you would like, Tara?)

01200250140301430013013013003100.0100310

(I don't care. Something....familiar.)

Fluids replaced fluids. Probes withdrew, or stimulated. The human brain began to slow its alpha waves. Tara had no recall after two minutes. She was going on another long journey, about which she would know nothing. A human passenger in an automated craft.

And during that time, she would dream?

FIRST MEETING

Tara Reece was hungry. She sat at the table and waited impatiently. Slowly her brothers and sisters joined her, bringing their plates and utensils. They all waited. Her father joined them with a smile.

"Nearly ready." They waited some more.

The room was small, just enough space to seat the six family members. Against one wall was an old wooden cabinet that held all their crockery and cutlery. The drawers held the knick-knacks that were valueless except to the people who had carefully collected them. The floor consisted of rough wooden boards, so worn in some places as to be dangerous to walk on. The walls had been decorated several years before, the Ministry insisting that all its property was maintained on an eight-year cycle. Studying the walls occupied much of the family's time. The wall contained one item that stood out as new and fresh. It was the communication system. It was primarily one way only, the family didn't have the privileges to call out. The Ministry needed to call them on occasion and so every home had to have one. It had only beeped twice before, to Tara's knowledge. One was a wrong number.

Some time later her mother entered with a large bowl, steam rising from the top, but little aroma to give away the contents. The bowl was placed ceremoniously at the very centre of the table and all looked expectantly as the lid was removed. The white mush looked familiar and a feeling of hardened resignation overcame the group as mother reached for the ladle.

The family talked little, there was little to talk about. Each day was the same as the previous. Get up early and eat a light breakfast. The older members would walk to the Ministry building, two miles away, and wait for a work permit and some work to do. Payment, when it came, was instant and cash. On those evenings they had meat. Other days, they were not so fortunate.

Being a large family had its advantages, at least one of them should get a job every other day. The disadvantage was the little money had to go further. There were no savings and no luxuries. Neither would there ever be. The strange thought that rose to Tara's mind every day was, 'this deprivation was so unnecessary'. It was all her father's choice. They could become fully affiliated to the Ministry and receive a minimum standard of living, far higher than they were currently experiencing. But her father refused the CoreTex. He adamantly refused to become part of the mass mind-control industry that was currently the vogue.

The meal was over quickly and they sat, not having anything better to do. This was the largest room in the house and this was a family moment. One by one they drifted away, some to bed, some to play with the neighbour's children. The two youngest children went to bed. It was dark now and their meagre lights glowed

in the walls. Any room that wasn't being used, the lights would automatically go out. As Tara walked to her shared bedroom, the lighting followed her along the short passageway.

She removed her shift and placed it carefully on the back of a chair, the only other item of furniture in the room other than the bed and a small shelf unit. She eased into bed with her three sisters and tried to think nice thoughts. As her breathing slowed and her heart rate settled, the lights slowly dimmed. Soon all four were asleep and the house was quiet. None of them heard the quiet footfalls of their parents as they came to their own bedroom and closed the door. They didn't hear the creak of the bed as they got in, nor the rhythmic creaking as they made love into the night. They only type of pleasure, or fulfilment, for them that day.

Some time later, Tara awoke with the call of nature, eased herself out of the bed and made the short journey to the toilet room. She sat and allowed her thoughts to drift away into a dreamland of her own. A land where she had created a luxuriant lifestyle and every day was sunny and happy. She began to drift off into sleep, but was awoken by a regular thump on the wall. Her parents had not finished for the night, but she had. Half asleep she returned to her bed and had to fight for the small space she regarded as hers. For the next hour she could hear her parents through the thin walls. Her happy place eluded her. She stared at the peeling ceiling wishing desperately for her life to change. If not change, then this one to end. She didn't know how much longer she could cope with the daily grind.

Some time later the house quietened and Tara fell asleep. As the dawn broke, her sisters were already up and she had the luxury of the whole bed to herself. She tried to recall her dreams and they eluded her. Like everything else in life, Tara was left empty-handed.

Her walk to the Ministry was tempered with sorrow. She was late so she hurried. The thoughts of the night before had left her unsettled. Her dreams had made her nervous and she couldn't recall why. The road was quiet, with only a few cars whisking silently past. The sun was shining and that usually made her happier. The trees and bushes were green with the full spring growth. She should be content with her life, but knew she wasn't, nor ever would be. As she turned the bend she saw the dark and foreboding building up ahead. It looked deserted, no Mot Blues for transport anywhere. She was far too late to get work!

She hurried up the steps and pushed gently on the door. To her surprise it opened and she walked into the gloomy hall. One station remained open with a queue of three people waiting, she sheepishly joined the rear. The high ceiling looked dark in the subdued light. The windowless building relying on the yellow glow of the wall lamps. She waited and looked around. Hundreds of bench seats lined the huge hallway, all empty now. It was quiet. Any noise echoed gently through the vaulted room. The people in front of her were speaking in whispers that bounced around the hall and seem to come at her from all directions. They sounded like a conspiracy was being formed and they were all talking about her. She shook her head to clear her imaginative drift. She reached into her pocket and clutched at her identity disk. Her turn should be soon. She'd wait and they'd tell her no work for the day and her long walk home would start.

There were only a few posters to look at. Mainly on the reception wall in front of her. All promoting the wonderful benefits of belonging to the Ministry of Transport and how life was good for all, if all were good to the ministry.

"Next." The voice whispered. Then repeated itself because Tara didn't hear. With a start she moved across the yellow line and slid her disk under the glass panel. Tara looked at the woman behind the screen and began to envy her. At least she had permanent employment and a regular income. She would have a decent life and have a happy family to go home to.

The clerk turned to collect a folder of papers from behind her desk. Her greying hair was piled up on her head and Tara could see the faint outline of the CoreTex Neural plug below her hairline. Yes, she would be living a very good lifestyle indeed. She would have to try again with father. She so wanted to feel what the plug was like. She'd heard it gave you everything you wanted. It could take over your mind – if you wanted it to. It could take you on a journey around the world, or out into space. Out to Mars too. If you wanted it to. It could make water taste like champagne and the white soup taste like....she didn't know anything that she could think of that was a luxury taste. White soup and old meat were her standard fare. Having no affiliation with a Ministry meant she was poor. She would never be allowed to starve, but would never improve her station in life. The Ministry called it Poverty without Pain. They also made it clear that it was by the individual's choice they remained in poverty. Nothing was compulsory in this politically correct world. Neither was anything automatic and free.

"Miss Reece?" The grey hair was talking to her again, about to send her away. "I've one job remaining, if you wish to consider it?"

Tara leaned forward eagerly, "Yes, of course. What is it?"

The woman continued to flick through the papers until she found the correct document. She passed it under the counter and asked Tara to sign her acceptance. Tara signed quickly before anyone could change their mind and then read the instructions for the days work.

An hour later she was wearily climbing the slight incline up to the house miles away from her home. She was going to be exhausted before she even started. As she'd anticipated, there was no transport vehicles left to take her to and from her place of work, so she had to walk. It was going to be a long day.

Ten hours later she was walking back down the incline with her thoughts a thousand miles away. The smooth blue coloured roadway made the walking easy and there were few cars to bother her progress. She looked ahead as the softly curving road wound down the hill, out through the forest and into the plain in the distance. Far away she could see the towers that were her home. They looked a day's walk away, but there was nothing else she could do. She walked on.

Several Mot Blue cars sped past and she wished one would stop for her, but they didn't. The standard Ministry car was used by everyone. Everyone that had a plug, she added to herself. A bright yellow car glided up the hill and passed her. She stopped to look at the sleek polished lines. That car bright out envy in her. Someone rich owned that. She turned back down the hill and walked on. She noticed ornate gates to her right and looked through them. One huge house dominated the view. She bet the yellow car's owner had a house like this one. The pink driveway swept round to the front of the house itself. Trees festooned the area, partly hiding the building. She gazed in awe at the manicured scene before her, so far from her own world.

The house had four storeys. To her right she saw a huge red wooden door - it was the size of her whole house. Above it was a balcony. With a start she realised someone was watching her. A young man stood on the balcony staring right at her. She stepped back, edging away from the gate, looking for shadow or cover from the trees. The young man waved at her. Her heart jumped. She couldn't be seen associating with the cultured masses. Her few privileges would soon be cut off. She turned and ran towards home.

Behind her, the young man felt strangely disappointed. He was intrigued to know who she was and felt exhilarated, wanting to discover this secret. If this was a new CoreTex game, it was an interesting one. He mentally summoned a car and heard the doors below him start to open. On impulse he slid over the balcony and allowed himself to glide to the ground, hanging on to the various handholds the building and shrubbery allowed. Within a moment he was inside the car and the gates were opening in front of him. The car moved forward and turned into the road to follow the girl. Something new was driving him. A pleasant excitement. He warmed to this feeling. Up ahead he saw a figure dressed in a long pale dress. She was walking now, unaware of the car in pursuit behind her.

Tara had set up a fast walking pace. It would be hours until she got home and it would be dark long before then. The incident at the gate had upset her. She'd been foolish. Her parents had instilled into her never to associate out of her class. It was frowned on by everyone. The privileged always felt threatened by the Ministry classes and were especially threatened by the classes below Ministry support.

Another car passed her by and she increased her pace. The car slowed in front of her and stopped. Uncertain she slowed and looked for a way past the vehicle without interfering with the driver's progress. The rear door opened and a young man got out. It was the same man! He'd followed her. She knew she was in trouble now. He must be angry. She saw the boy was grinning at her. She turned and ran.

He said quickly, "Wait. Please."

Tara stopped in mid stride, but kept her back to him. It was not her place to disobey the privileged, but she was terrified she was about to be punished for such a stupid mistake. She heard his footsteps as he approached. She kept her head down and hoped her ordeal would soon be over. He moved around to the front of her and she could feel him waiting for something. He was staring at her and all she could see was the blue road.

She saw his feet in front of her. He wore soft white shoes which moved closer to her. She tensed, expecting a blow, or a verbal outburst. She flinched as his hand cupped her chin and moved her head upwards. Slowly her eyes saw the whole of his body until finally looked into his eyes. Her first thought was how clear his skin was. Young and smooth, without a blemish. He was lean and fit and very good looking. He was smiling and there didn't seem any malice in his eyes, just....curiosity. Could she afford to relax?

"You've nothing to be afraid of. What's your name?" He said quietly.

She kept her eyes on the ground as she softly said, "Tara. Tara Reese."

"Come with me," he said, releasing his hold on her face. She quickly resumed her examination of the ground. "You wanted to see the house, didn't you? Come with me and I'll show you. Please."

Slowly her head came up and she looked into his face again. She saw the blue sharpness of his eyes and the depth of the pupils startled her. He could not stop smiling. Slowly she smiled too. A small, frightened smile.

“You won’t hurt me?”

He gazed at her for long moments before saying, so quietly she hardly heard, “I could never hurt you.”

The remainder of the day passed in a haze for Tara. He’d shown her the house, her eye’s growing wider and wider with every step. She spoke little and he found himself babbling. The house was empty except for the servants, so he had few interruptions in his desperate attempts to find out more about her. They sat on the rear balcony, which seemed to stretch away in to the distance. The sun warmed her skin and she began to finally relax. The fear of retribution and punishment, receding rapidly. She closed her eyes and felt her chair back recline to accommodate her. Her eyes sprang open wide in sudden apprehension. The chair back halted, uncertain if she wanted to sit up again. The boy watched, smiling at her confusion. He allowed the rest to ease down gently, her eyes closing again as she felt the efforts of the day taking its toll. She was almost asleep and he could stare at her without feeling guilty.

She slept, unaware of her surroundings, unencumbered by her sister’s bodies crowding her, and warmed by the sun she rarely had the opportunity to enjoy. The boy memorised every line in her face, from every angle he committed them to memory and recorded them on the Core. He needed the details later.

He summoned a meal to be served on the deck and sat waiting until Tara awoke. She came awake with a start. She leapt off the recliner and started around her, fearful and uncertain. The young man sat and waited until she was once again aware of her surroundings before saying, “I thought you may be hungry.” He waved his hand towards the table, laden with a wide variety of food. She still looked in all directions, expecting danger, but the primeval urge broke to the surface rapidly and her stomach growled in anticipation.

He sat back, watching her eat. She was certainly hungry. He sipped his water that, for the moment, was vintage champagne. It seemed appropriate for the occasion. She pushed food into her mouth, as if she had not eaten for days. ‘Perhaps she hadn’t’, he thought sadly. He waited, silent and watchful.

The food tasted wonderful. There was not an item she’d eaten before. It was all so.....tasty! She knew she was over-eating. She knew it would be a struggle to walk all that way home on an overly-full stomach, but this opportunity would not present itself again. Home! The work struck a dark chord in her mind. Dusk was approaching and she began to get nervous. She found the courage to voice her fears and said she had to get home.

“I’ll take you.” He smiled.

A look of fear shot across her face and she quickly shook her head. After several hours of trying to talk to the girl, get her to respond, his patience was wearing thin. “I’ll take you. Come along.”

He held out his hand and she obediently took it. He moved her down the long walk to the south drive where a car was waiting for them. He sat inside with her, with ill-concealed excitement, as the driverless car moved forwards towards the slowly opening gates at the end of the pink driveway.

“Where to?”

Tara took her time answering and finally said, “The Beeches. Number thirty.”

The boy repeated the address in his mind and felt the positive response from the car, as it accelerated down the road. The Beeches had an echo of memory. He’d heard of it somewhere.

They sat back in the car as it drove out to the plainer and more denser dwellings. It turned off east and the buildings were taller and denser still. The car stopped outside a tall ugly building and waited.

Tara began to get out and he stopped her. “No, please. Thank you,” she said, opening the door and was gone.

He watched her run into the open doorway without looking back. He sat back in the seat and the car moved away at his mental bidding. The drive back was a blur. His mind was in turmoil. Why had he done all those things today? She was a stranger when he met her and remained a stranger still. What was he doing?

With a brief contact with the Core, he established that The Beeches were the renowned poorer part of the area. People without jobs, supported entirely by the Ministry of Transport. Tara was a social and economic problem. But she was certainly beautiful. He connected to the Core again and established the telenumber of her address. He requested the connection and immediately heard the soft noise of the answering machine.

A voice spoke in his head. “Hello.”

“May I speak with Tara, please?”

“Who is this?”

He recalled that he had not mentioned his name to her. “Just say a friend.”

He waited a few moments before he heard her voice. “Hello?”

“Hello, Tara. It’s me, Riki. Can we meet again?”

A flash of fear surged through her as she felt her knees weaken. She leant close the communication unit and didn’t know how to answer. He had tracked her down. She’d thought her escape was complete. What now? What did the boy want from her?

“Yes. Of course.”

What else could she say?

DEVELOPING RELATIONS

Time had meant nothing to Riki before. To him, all days were the same. He ate when hungry, slept when tired. Now he found himself counting the hours. Watching for minutes to pass by, until he could see Tara again. If this had been another of his fantasy women, he would call her up on CoreTex, have wild and exciting sex and switch off until she was needed again. But not Tara. This was a totally new experience for him. She was real. Real flesh and blood. He could not turn on Tara, nor could he remove her from his thoughts. Neither did he want to.

After suffering a particularly long and agonising day waiting for their meeting time to arrive, he created a duplicate on the CoreTex. He visualised every aspect of her face. The small pointed chin. The wide blue eyes. The long wavy blond hair. The pert breasts and the slim legs with small delicate feet. CoreTex provided him with the sample model and twirled it around, naked in his mind. Somehow, Riki could not make the adjustments so they looked right. The fantasy image looked wrong, very wrong. One of the main problems being, that Riki had only seen Tara fully clothed. Her naked body was a little difficult for him to visualise. All his experience of naked women came from stock samples from the Core. As he preferred dark hair, huge breasts and ample hipped women, that was all he ever saw.

He accepted the final product of the Tara model as the best his imagination could provide and placed the nude in a suitable beach setting. There, he had repeated sex with his fantasy, bringing him to new heights of gratification. He switched off the image and realised his indulgence had only wasted ten minutes of his waiting time. He felt the exercise was wasted. That evening he would have sex with her and then remodel the CoreTex image for future use.

For Tara the build up to her meeting a Privileged, was quite different. In the first instance she had decided to tell her father everything about her first day with the young man. Then decided against it. It was a one-off experience and would never happen again. She had been frightened and confused, but had enjoyed it. When the call came from her nemesis, she had to admit to her family what she had done. Their reaction was surprising. Her father told her to obey the man to the letter. She had corrected him, “Boy!”

He waved off her arguments and insisted she took this as far as possible. Her mother watched with a less convincing a smile. Later she took her eldest daughter aside and tried to find out exactly what happened. The mother felt easier that the boy had not made any unwanted advances, now she needed to help her daughter understand the almost inevitable outcome of his attention. For the first time the mother had to give her daughter the benefit of experienced sexual education. And finally Tara realised there was more to life than her current everyday existence. It also explained the noises in the night from her parent’s bedroom. It at once frightened and stimulated her active young mind. Her mother made as cautionary tale as possible, knowing the outcome was already decided, and was torn between her husband’s desire to get some benefit from this gift of a relationship - and her own need to protect her daughter from the big bad world.

The whole Reece family watched as the bright green limousine drew up in the street. They gave a tearful farewell to their grown up family member and waved as she ran down the stairs. It seemed like she was not expected to return. Her mother feared that more than anything. The car drove away and they watched for many minutes after it disappeared. They returned to their meal table and sat. And waited.

Riki and Tara sat opposite each other out on the rear deck. The sun was setting and the romantic moment was not lost on either of the young people. Used to over-simulated female company, Riki was lost for words.

“So....shall we?” He noticed the hesitancy and wondered what to say next. “Don’t you want to?” His voice seeming distant and lost.

Tara tried to smile and said, “I’m not sure. I thought we would just.....you know, talk.”

He shook his head and tried to think. Normally he just demanded what he wanted and the Core provided a positive response to his emotions. What was he supposed to do with this girl? He’d no control over her. She was a deprived girl, with no real understanding of his needs. He paused in his line of thought. “Deprived girl?”

He left her sitting on the balcony seat and went inside the house. When he returned two minutes later, he handed her a credit disk. She took it slowly and looked at him in puzzlement.

He shrugged. “Four hundred credits. That ought to help you decide.”

They lay in each others arms exhausted. He was drifting between sleep and wakefulness. She looked at his perfect skin and hoped her’s was not as bad as it had been of late. This boy was certainly a puzzlement to her. He had everything he could want and yet wanted to have her. It was obvious he’d never had sex before. But then, neither had she. She had not even been aware of anything about it until a few days ago.

Then she realised that with something like the neural plug, you didn’t wait for anything. Instant gratification was the proud boast of the CoreTex operatives. ‘Not the real thing - Better!’ She often wished she could be connected to CoreTex, but then knew why she didn’t have the implant. And it was not just because of the cost.

He opened his eyes and felt her stroking his hair gently. It felt warming to him. He smiled as he nuzzled deeper into her breasts. This was very comforting to him. Something that never happened after CoreTex sex. He relaxed in her arms and enjoyed the attention she was giving him. He sighed as he remembered the physical action of moments earlier. He had to admit, it was very disappointing. It was physically hard work and he realised there was certainly more skill in keeping in contact, while trying to get the maximum feeling from the actual sexual motions. His physical release was certainly disappointing. Normally there was a tremendous surge of feeling from the groin that spread throughout his whole body. Somehow this was not so powerful and only came in waves, slowly diminishing to a simple pleasurable overall feeling of relaxation. On the whole, CoreTex was better.

He kissed the nipple nearest to him and moved his head to one side, looking down her slim body. When he redesigned her, he would beef up her thighs a little and enlarge her breasts. That was necessary for his fantasy. The sexual gratification would be better too. Although.....he had to admit, there was something different about this real thing. He tried to analyse what it was. It was something to do with how he felt afterwards. He was enjoying the bodily feelings, but there was something else happening to him at the same time. He slowly gathered the thoughts to realise that he’d felt real joy in having sex with the girl. A joy, a natural happiness. It was not purely a series of motions to get rid of the teenage sexual itch. It was a new emotion. And although confused by it, he knew he liked it.

CoreTex sex was certainly instant, no warming up required. No effort needed. And no responsibility afterwards. No build-up and no conclusion. It was pure fantasy, from a sophisticated computer supplying only images and imitating physical feelings. For all these years Riki had thought he’d known what sex was like, but he’d been wrong. The real thing was certainly less intense, as a feeling, but more exciting emotionally.

Tara was both surprised and disappointed. She’d started by being embarrassed, no one had seen her naked before, except her sisters. His attentions had been a little rapid and before she could begin to understand what was happening her was inside her. It was a shock and she was coming to terms with that shock when it was all over. She tried to recall all the feelings and change of emotions, but there was so little to remember. Was that it?

She was running her fingers over his shoulders. Little muscular tremors followed. He felt her move her head and felt a light kiss on the neck. He turned his head upwards and she gently kissed him. He felt moisture on his face and looked up to see she was crying.

“What’s the matter?”

She wiped her face and shook her head. Riki sat up, concerned. “Was that the first time without CoreTex for you?”

She shook her head and added, “I don’t have CoreTex.”

He smiled and seemed to redden in the face. “Of course not. I do it all the time. First real time for you?”

The tears began to fall more heavily and she rapidly swung her legs off the bed and left the room.

It was over an hour before Riki could get Tara to talk to him. They sat at a table, drinking water. She'd stopped crying, but the tears were not far away. Riki could vaguely remember his mother crying, many years ago. And his sister too. But he'd never cried. Never had the desire to. He was baffled by this girl.

"What did you mean when you said - you'd been paid?"

"I meant just that. I feel no better than a prostitute."

"What's a prostitute?" Riki asked with a frown.

She looked at him to see if he was mocking her. She recalled her mother's exact words. "It's a women that gets paid to have sex. They're pretty much redundant because of CoreTex, although there are some in the area where I live. Only people without CoreTex need them anymore."

"And what's wrong with a 'prostitute', then?"

She looked again, longer this time. His face was still serious. "They get paid to have sex. That's what's wrong. It's degrading. It's.....a sign of desperation. And you paid me, making me feel degraded and desperate too." The tears started again and Riki felt tenseness in his chest. She was trying to compose how she was going to tell her mother about this development.

He shook his head and said, "I didn't pay you to have sex with me. I paid you to stay with me. I thought you might go. Leave me. I wanted you to stay."

She looked up from her small, damp handkerchief and said, "Really?"

"Really. We went to bed because I wanted that. I thought you did too. I thought everyone did. I'm sorry if I upset you. I'll take the credits back, shall I?"

She reached into her pocket and slid the disk across to him. He picked up the coin-sized disk and said, "Do you really need money so desperately?"

"I've no money, no job. Yes I need the money. And yes, unfortunately, right now my family needs money desperately."

"I'm sorry."

"What're you sorry for? Because you don't know what being poor is like?"

Riki shook his head, unable to answer her question.

"My family are not affiliated to any Ministry. We don't have jobs. We live on the breadline. The poor feed off the poor, you know. Employment by a Ministry means you're automatically provided with a home, a car, CoreTex, food and leisure facilities. For anyone else, outside of the Ministry, to afford these things it would cost them far more than the Ministry buys them in for. We get none of these benefits, which others take for granted. Employment is what I want, but I don't stand a chance of getting a job here on Earth. The Government of this country are hoping people like us will eventually die out, but the human spirit is strong. We fend for ourselves. We still survive."

Riki was taken aback by the passion of the girl's heartfelt protest. He slid the disk back across the table to her and stood. "For just staying with me. A present to your family." He left the room to think.

Two hours later they were back in bed again and both crying together. This was a tremendous release for Riki. He felt he would not be able to stop his tears. She held him close, her salty tears mixing with his, dampening the SheerSheet.

This was certainly turning out to be a day for Tara to learn new emotions. Her mind was in turmoil. She felt new and powerful feelings rushing through her body. Making her do and say things far beyond any dreams she'd had in the past. She wanted to hold this boy to her chest and mother him for ever. Tears flowed for no recognisable reason. He began to talk to her, as he had never spoken to anyone.

As he told her his secret thoughts, he realised that he had rarely talked to anyone before. No one had ever wanted to listen, nor cared for him. The Core had always provided everything. But it had not provided emotional comfort to Riki in the same way Tara was.

For many years it was known that the human brain generated at least three types of brainwaves. Alpha, the relaxed state; Beta, a higher frequency generated when deeply relaxed, or under anaesthesia; and Delta waves, the lowest frequency creating amplitude, normally when asleep. Jugen Huguen discovered a fourth, at the turn of the millennium, Zeta waves. His detailed experiments had lasted for over thirty years until he could not only establish these ultra high frequency waves, but was able to directly access them - and control them.

The ever increasing drug abuse became prevalent worldwide by the early twenty-second century. It was clear, to the newly emerging World Nations that a cure had to be found to reduce the desire for mass consumption. They turned to Hugen and his claims that he could control and stimulate the human sensory organs.

Vast amounts of financial support were given to Hugen, who came up with a very basic model of what was to become CoreTex. The early model was a headset that slipped over the head, with sensors touching the skin at the base of the neck. Strong impulses were generated by this equipment and it was a year before it was declared safe to use without a doctor present.

The CoreTex unit is surgically implanted at the base of the neck. The highly sensitive neurone connections terminating at one end in the selected areas of the brain, the other in a small connector, or socket. A small plug is placed in the socket, the end of which is connected to the central computer at CoreTex. Along this connection passes all the information in both directions. The signal from CoreTex intercepts and replaces the signals from the brain, allowing the human mind to see, feel and hear only what CoreTex is sending.

CoreTex can access directly what the participant is thinking and process it accordingly. This makes personal imagery so successful. The subject thinks of what he would like to experience, CoreTex computer interprets the message and sends back a suitable image. This image is super enhanced and personally designed for the recipient. CoreTex imagery stimulates the brain, with a similar effect to taking drugs. The major differences being, there is no addiction, no harmful side affects, just the benefits. There are no up, or down, periods after use. It was promoted as a safe and easy way to kick the drug habits of millions of people. So CoreTex was quickly developed and adopted in every area of human life-style. It was also cheap to mass-produce, with a small insertion charge and a rental payment. For those that belonged to a Ministry, it was regarded as part of their salary. Within a few years eighty percent of the world had access to basic CoreTex. It replaced large social areas of people's lives.

Riki explained all this to Tara and how all his upbringing was provided by the Core. The CoreTex taught him all he needed, using the StimSchool system. CoreTex told him anything he wanted to know and showed him anything he wanted to see, at the exact time the knowledge was required. Why cluttered the memory with unwanted knowledge, just in case it was needed? The neural enhancements allowed anyone to experience almost any human sensation, better than if experienced for real. Subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, enhancements to the feedback heightened the experiences, making them larger than life.

Riki's parents were always absent. Although parents in the biological sense, he and his siblings, never saw the inside of her womb. A few human servants were all he saw, or with whom he communicated. Apart from his friends on the ComCore, he'd no contact with other real people. He felt he never needed to. Until now!

She was rocking him gently in her arms, as he finished with his words of regret. He'd not realised the depth of emotion that had always been inside him. This girl had brought his inner-self to the surface. She hugged him and gently smoothed his hair. He cried until his lungs became breathless. Slowly, the tension eased in his chest and he quietened.

Her tears mixed with his, but she had no help from recalling past experiences. She had no emotional history and was totally confused at what was happening to her. In a soft, almost far away voice, she spoke of her only dreams. She was speaking to a distant listener, although Riki held on to her every word.

"My one ambition is get my family off-world. I don't care where. Mars, the moon, anywhere. Get us into a Ministry job. Let them provide our housing, food and some money. Save it all up and return here to Earth. Live a normal life. We don't want the high life. Just 'A' life." She wrapped her arms around him tighter and kissed his head again. "You're very nice, Riki. I'm so glad I met you. It can't last, I know it, but while it does....."

The two teenagers cried themselves into a restful sleep. Both slept in the comfort of finding someone special in their lives.

Their relationship developed slowly. Tara experienced a burgeoning wave of emotions, most of which she shared with her mother and sisters. Few with her father. Some experiences and feelings she kept entirely to herself. Her mother had mentioned the word 'love'. It was hard for her mother to explain, but for Tara it became easier to understand. This was her new destiny. She hadn't dared to dream her life could change so completely – all from a chance meeting. Her path into the future was set. She could so no other option but to be with Riki.

Riki saw Tara initially as a new emotional toy. To take out of the box and put away again. Slowly that impression changed. He found that once a week was not enough, he wanted to see her every day. He started to investigate getting her paid work, then realised that this would restrict his access to her. He decided to settle

for making sure she'd enough money coming in to help the family of six. She was still very sensitive about this issue. Riki became increasingly creative in finding things to buy her and her family, or ways to spend money to their benefit. She knew what he was doing, but was comforted by how much pleasure it gave him to give her support. She told him all her feelings and in return, he told her all of his. No one had ever relied on him before and he was beginning to feel really appreciated.

The arrival of the expensive limousine at the unpretentious apartment blocks of The Beeches, was beginning to give Tara's family neighbour problems. With a big car, came big expectations. At her suggestion, Riki bought a Mot Blue and met her outside the block. She would run out to meet him and he would drop her off later.

Her young inexperienced mind cried out for more of this almost blissful existence. Her body physically ached for his touch. Her whole day was tense, waiting to meet him again. When she was with him, she was dreading the inevitable moment of parting.

Riki was daily trying to answer the ongoing question of why he was so infatuated with this girl. He logged onto StimSchool and browsed through the memory banks. He found several CoreNovels about human relationships and dipped into them. He was intrigued to find a section in a novel called "Where are we now", by Daniel Steer. He read the same chapter three times. The words spoke of the human emotion called 'love'. It described the physical and emotional process enjoyed, and endured, between two people. So was this what was happening to Riki? Was he falling in love?

Daniel Steer particularly described love as, "The lost human emotion."

CAST ADRIFT -1

Slowly Tara became aware of her mind working and familiar thoughts were invading. If she'd any direct control of her body, her lips would have smiled as the image of the dream faded.

12020025002302400153012130013202132002

What's happening, Aphrodite?

012010100020120504200123502140232002540230124024001

(I think I may have something of interest here.)

12012026025400142042

Show me.

The darkness that was Tara's mental contact screen, slowly cleared to another black image. Points of light scattered across the panorama. Some large and sparkling. Small, and all cold. Stars.

12012012302504025100121201235201201200

What am I looking for?

01230210230

(Here.)

An area of the darkness was briefly illuminated by a coloured circle. The circle faded and Tara's vision seemed to expand, as a point of light was being drawn towards her. As it came closer, the definition improved and Tara could finally see why Aphrodite had stopped.

120120302540021001300

(What is this?)

Clear in her mind she saw a shape, drifting in space. The shape was roughly five-sided, each side comprised of a space suit. The heads of all five suits were almost touching, while the bodies fanned out from the centre. Like a rough wheel, slowly rotating through time.

102012012032012032001201201520420120120012002001200120150

Are these aliens? They look human to me!

As the image crept ever closer, she could see more detail of the suits. They were bulky and coloured a faded grey. The bowl helmets were dark coloured, hiding the creatures inside. Each suit had its wrists tied to the next

suit's wrist. It reminded Tara of old movies when sky-diving was popular. She remembered a formation falling through the air, the people breaking the formation before a parachute opened above each of them.

120120302540021001300

What is this?

There was writing on each suit. Names, scrawled in rough letters. Painted on with a small brush. There were further markings and words on some of the suits.

1201012002012012001525001455200450021

Are you recording all this?

01201201200350

(Affirmative.)

120150120350240120450142012010412000240251002

Take them on board and quarantine them.

01201201200350

(Affirmative.)

The images slipped past the ships visual range and moments passed before Aphrodite contacted Tara again.

01203021002132416579551626126265765612372131332131751621301

(On board and secured. Beginning analysis.)

1201201200350

Affirmative.

Time passed, as Tara slipped into another level.

0141022000120321030123525200320321020

(Action completed)

1200310021003100213002165

Results?

0120201002100210650014206678201560015320048050540565054020660740206690550210550000545206
55021205322055022305522032230550

(The suits contain human remains. They've been dead for a very long time.)

12015200120

How long?

0120152012201200121

(Ninety years.)

1200120150015001220

Cause of death?

010011220551020100254000062044105501220055201452015022014202110220110522201212012120

(Oxygen starvation. They were also very dehydrated and undernourished.)

1200210001201530335003263003600152002200222

They ran out of water, food and finally air?

01201201200350

(Affirmative.)

120120140047802206650121055032022105502200210220112205441012021011054410110544110

Nothing here for us. On to the next. Have you anything in sight?

0102011220221022201120220122011550111020210112102220220

(Nothing yet, I'll revert to our programmed course.)

The stars began to move as the ship changed its direction.

1200120

Wait.

The movement slowed and stopped.

Tara felt something was missing. Why had she dismissed this event as having no interest to their mission? They were years away from Earth and had found deceased fellow human beings.....That was it! She was still programmed to think like a machine. Think like Aphrodite. These were fellow human beings! She should've some concern for them. She should be considerate towards how they ended their lives in such a bizarre manner.

1020120012036015870048004702011405004

Can you plot their original course?

01201201200350

(Affirmative.)

120220012002001201105220141501104211015242011220115221015200111022011020110221011020110

Locate the point in space where they died. There may be a ship.

01201201200350

(Affirmative.)

10221155210415101521001450014502115210

How long for us to reach it?

012014001

(Why?)

10155005201502221055202012121052202502105201505201055214150

I need to know what happened to these people.

012014001

(Why?)

It took a while before Tara could find the real answer.

012014001

(Why?)

Repeated Aphrodite.

1201212025011507471055704102550410120570410102505404102054040

Because they are very much like us, Aphrodite.

0221055210145201450

(In what way?)

10221055201155201145201150211055220141501145.69084741025260541026066501150665540121526.05
540125055441120555041020550552100

Years away from home. Their families may all be dead by now. They're adrift.

0215022105520221055520211041502210

(But we're not dead.)

10221056201450211056021055021020

That's a matter of opinion.

02125011210411021110221210

(I don't understand.)

1023021100521206581025101205221022002205110220112025221012201102220122022102220255402052
102110100020021005020201052021020

What was their reason for being here? We're here because we've been sent by the World Nations. Why are they here?

10226301105211012011022102120210222011020210102022101205201412011201202

(You wish us to spend some time trying to find out?)

0120120120035001201550105020160

Affirmative. I mean yes!

0120521052201501122012200221102210221015220102220122011022221102220122

(How long a time? Give me a definitive search period.)

1205472015201215010150112010112011012011012401102410125041260211121421011440000101000002
1010001100021020102001020021020

Let's spend up to two years looking for their ship. It may give us an idea why they're here. And how they died.

0201220412001230211022011022103220112011210221022202011022101212011201102201012201112000
1252102150221202158010120512051002120021202001221022100210200021210245246000002154640001
2424200215242020522400222102420212010220102420120122124200220120242102204122401224102210
2101020

(Two years? I strongly recommend no longer. We've a mission to complete. The ship may not be anywhere near the source of their course. It has probably drifted in any direction for ninety years. There's little chance of our finding it. I have to warn you of this.)

102256022140201011202100220101212020115220110522021602211010200220102012200121

I know. I have to make an effort. And one other thing.

0122011501210

(Yes?)

1022012025020102120211021015250460211049047211202669011022020552011050520101024052201015
0201010022101050220105020154201405201200

Can we cut out the computer language. Speak to me direct in my mother tongue!

012012025041102054041203202021101052505402120205410120200

(Data takes longer to transfer that way.)

1020510025202232021022020

What's our hurry?

0120120120035001201550105020160

(Affirmative. I mean yes.)

The stars moved again and they lost their sharpness. As the drive picked up speed the stars streaked passed Tara's vision and disappeared altogether. Once past light speed, nothing was visible to the human eye anymore. Tara switched to the computer's monitor and saw the galaxy as a large fully functioning 3-D model. She saw the red path of the planned trajectory and the small white dot of their current position. It moved slowly along the weaving arc, heading for some point never previously visited by man.

That was not strictly true, Tara thought. The five people in the hold had visited there once - and were now dead. Tara felt she had an obligation to find out why.

(Dream sequence commenced.)

Wait, Aphrodite. What was that last dream?

(It was one of the dreams you recorded for the voyage. Do you not remember it?)

It was so long ago. My mind has been altered so much since.

(It was one of the ones that seemed important to you, at the time.)

Is there any more of it?

(Oh yes.)

Let me have the rest then, please.

(Dream sequence commenced.)

For the complete novel please visit: <http://www.phil-lewis.net/publications/ebooks.htm>

This is a MIRROR NOVEL the second part is called SOLO

Also available from: <http://www.phil-lewis.net/publications/ebooks.htm>