

Tia

By Dante Harker

The metallic clang of coins hitting the collection plate woke Tia from her sleep. The calming darkness gave way to a view of legs rushing along Manila's busiest tourist street. Tia took a deep breath and let the fetid odour of burst garbage bags, petrol fumes and the sweet scent of the church goers fill her lungs.

Today would be a good day. It was Sunday and though last night, like every night, Tia's mother had been drunk, she had still managed to move them to her favourite haunt opposite the cavernous city church.

Through the open church door, Tia could see the service was nearly over. It was almost time.

'Mum. Mum. Wake up.' Tia said, shaking her mother and praying for a response. The only one she got was a brief murmur followed by a hacking cough that left a red smudge on her mum's hand as she wiped her mouth.

'Please Mum, it's time for us to move, we have to get over to the other side of the street before they start coming out,' the little girl said, but her words were lost on her mother, who had spent most of yesterday's begging money on a bottle of white liquor.

Tia gave her mother one last shake, but another hacking cough told Tia she would have to go to the church alone. She stood up, stretched and then battled through the roaring traffic to get over to the church gates.

It was 11:30 and the full heat of the Filipino sun had started to beat down. Acrid vapour rose from the pavement under the sun's heat and added to the stench of the day. Tia positioned herself under the shade of a large broad-leafed tree that grew up through the three metre high railings that surrounded the church. The little girl stood just far enough away from the church's entrance so as not to draw attention to herself from the guard who sat in a little box, ready to block the path of anyone who didn't look wealthy enough to pray in the new city church.

The guard sat on a stool and glared at anyone who came too close. He was fat enough so that his crossed arms rested neatly on his expansive stomach and Tia knew that, if she had to, she would have no problem out- running him. But that wasn't her plan. In five minutes or so the parishioners would leave the church and, if Tia was lucky,

they wouldn't have given all their loose change to the collection plate and she could beg enough for a decent meal – that's if she managed to get to the shop before her mother got her hands on any of the money.

A lifestyle of begging, hiding from the authorities and a mother who felt that alcohol was the only necessary food group, hadn't allowed for much growth on Tia's eight-year-old frame. At barely a metre tall, Tia struggled to see her way past the various plants and statues that led up to the church doors. The little girl debated going back over to the other side of the road, where the distance gave her a better view. But time was getting on and she knew the service couldn't go on much longer. Plus, she had noticed that a couple of grubby little children had started to gather too and she didn't want to lose her place. Instead, she stood on her tiptoes and craned her neck, which gave her a passable view of the entrance.

An old woman with skin like sun-beaten leather took her place at the church door. She was holding a huge gold plate that was filled with shinning coins and a wealth of banknotes. Tia caught a glimpse of the old woman's eyes, they were dark, almost black and even at a distance they had a way of making you feel guilty.

The priest joined the old woman and they stood side-by-side and thanked the parishioners as they left. Tia was sure that

those who gave, again, to the collection plate received an extra warm handshake.

As she stood there in a filthy pink t-shirt, the picture of a 'Care Bear' that had once been printed on the front, long gone she wished that she had been born rich so that she could have a God, too. If she had an aim in life, other than to find her next meal and make it through the night, it was to have enough money so that she had some to give away. Then perhaps she could dress-up in smart clothes and shake the priest's hand every Sunday.

A gentle wind caught the front of Tia's blue, pleated skirt. It rushed through the holes in the fabric and gave the rip in the seam, caused by a tramp's grabbing hands, a boost in its suicidal quest to tear completely from bottom to top and end the skirt's grubby life. Brushing the skirt down, Tia inched forward as the parishioners made their way down the path and towards the large iron gates. At their approach the guard dragged himself out of his chair and offered up a pleasant smile to the passersby.

'Please!' Tia said, as she rushed into the crowd. Her right hand was held open and high, she knew it didn't shine like the collection plate but she hoped it would be filled nonetheless. With her left hand she pulled on people's pockets, pointed at bags, made feeding gestures and generally did whatever she could to attract the attention of

the parishioners who seemed determined to ignore her.

On the other side of the street, Tia's actions cracked a lurid smile across a pallid white face. The fifty-something-year-old man wiped sweat off his face as he watched. He wiped his newly wet hand on the back of his crisp blue jeans. He looked around quickly, not wanting to lose sight of the pretty little girl, his eyes found a café with empty chairs outside. He moved, sat down, and continued to watch the girl at her work.

'Miss, please, sir, sir, please!' Tia continued, working her way through the crowd but getting nowhere. From the other side of the mass, Tia could hear, but not yet see, the sound of a mother calling for the parishners to provide food for her baby. It seemed the baby was sick, and needed money for medicine. It was probably a lie, which, sadly for Tia, was working. In reality, Tia knew the baby would be perfectly healthy; in fact it was unlikely the baby even belonged to the bag lady who was succeeding where Tia wasn't. Her mother had told her that sometimes people who ran day-care centres rent out the babies for the day while their mothers are off working. No one wants to give a dirty old bag lady money but lots of people are suckers for a clean little baby.

Not one of the parishioners caught Tia's eye, she dragged at their clothes, pulled at their bags, but they all kept on talking, moving slowly towards their aircon cars and soon they would

be gone – leaving Tia with nothing. This was Sunday, it was meant to be a good day; a day when she got to eat.

The little girl heard the familiar clink of coins hitting the collection plate and turned her head to find out the source of the noise. Through the crowd, Tia could see that the coins weren't actually hitting the plate; they were being emptied from it. The notes had been removed and Tia watched the sun glint off the silver coins as they were poured into a black velvet bag. The coins sent sparks of radiant white light streaming through the trees, each shard catching a leaf which made the trees shine.

Soon enough, Tia stood in front of the old woman. She looked up into her dark eyes, held out her hand and said, 'please'. The child's gaze moved from the heavy-set eyes down to the bag that now held the parishioner's guilt money.

'Please!' Tia said again, mustering up what was left of her childhood naivety. Even looking straight into the old woman's eyes it was as if Tia didn't exist. The woman's long dark fingers worked quickly at the velvet bag, making sure that every coin made it into its safe confines.

'Please!' Tia tried one last time but the woman kept working. The bag full, she pulled tightly on the cord to seal the bag and placed it back on the collection plate.

As the woman moved her hand away from the bag Tia saw a chance, she could snatch the bag and be away before the old crone realised what had happened. It would mean finding another church but still, the money in that black velvet bag would be enough to keep Tia and her mother fed for a month. At least it would be if Tia hid half the money so that her mother couldn't piss it all away.

Without another thought Tia whipped her hand forward and wrapped her fingers around the bag. The soft velvet made her fingers tingle and she could already taste the first meal bought with the church-goers' generosity.

Before Tia had chance to move the bag more than a centimetre away from the plate, the old woman struck. A hand slapped across Tia's face knocking her to the floor. The little girl clung to the bag as she fell, but before she had time to settle and realise how much pain the slap was going to induce, like a cobra bearing down on its prey, the old woman struck again. In a single movement she managed to kick Tia in the ribs and snatch the bag out of her hand. The kick was subtle enough not to be picked up by the gawking onlookers but Tia felt it, it would surely raise a bruise on her ribs that would match the welt she'd have on her face.

'YOU EVIL, EVIL CHILD! YOU'LL GO STRAIGHT TO HELL FOR THIS!' the old woman bellowed. Tia could almost taste

the woman's venomous breath as it rushed passed the remnants of octogenarian teeth and fell on her face.

The bruised child didn't wait for further retribution; she scrambled away from the myriad accusing eyes. Somehow she managed to get to her feet and run from the crowd.

'STRAIGHT TO HELL!' the old woman screamed after her but Tia was no longer listening, her only thoughts were of escape. Chapter Two

Pretty Things and dirty deeds

'This way,' the fifty-something man called to the little girl as she made it away from the crowd. The man was speaking English but over the years, Tia had learned that if she wanted to make any money from begging she had to speak the language of commerce.

Against her instinct she followed the man down a side street and away from the screams of the old woman. Her face hurt, the hag's ring had cut her cheek and a drop of blood had found its way into her mouth. The blood's coppery tang made her feel weak and when they eventually stopped running, both were gasping for breath.

'Not the brightest move,' the man said when he found sufficient breath.

'I need food,' Tia said, her instincts returning to normal.

'You sure do. Look at you, little thing, all skin and bones. And look at that little outfit of yours; we really need to get you cleaned up.'

The man smiled a bright white smile. For a man of his age the whiteness of his teeth looked unnatural, they almost shone in what little light was managing to penetrate the alley.

'My name's George. What's your name, little one?' George's words sounded melodic, like a nursery rhyme. Tia hadn't spoken to enough white men to know the accent but it had a calm ring to it and the look in his eyes seemed to promise a good meal.

'Tia,' the little girl said; her voice almost a whisper at the side of George's.

'What a beautiful name, it suits such a pretty little girl.' Tia couldn't follow everything that George was saying but she understood his tone. She had heard it before, many times, but then she was usually positioned outside the popular

tourist bars, trying to get money from the westerners who were out to impress the local girls. Early in the evening, when the men were still in full wooing mode, Tia knew they would often give out change to the beggars to make themselves look generous. Sadly, to get that change, Tia would have to sit for hours listening to men spit out tacky chat-up line after tacky chat-up line.

Maybe this is how all western men talk to females; Tia thought and then smiled back at George. He had just about regained his breath. The escape down the alley had taken its toll on the aging westerner and the impromptu exercise had caused a huge sweat patch to form on George's white shirt. The fabric, now translucent, showed off his extensive beer gut, covered by a rug of matted gray hair.

'I have to go and change,' George said after looking at the mess he was in, 'I could grab us some food from the 7/11 and we could eat it up at my room.'

Noticing Tia's face drop at the idea of going to his room, George gestured at his sweat-soaked shirt and added, 'I can't eat like this; I can get us a load of food, then you can tuck in while I get cleaned up.' Then as a final selling point he said, 'plus, I think you're about the same size as my daughter, I'm sure she won't mind if you have one of the new dresses I was going to take back for her.'

The thought of a new dress and ‘loads of food’ was enough to convince Tia of the idea. She knew she could handle herself and her stomach was screaming at her to take the offer – it hadn’t been fed since yesterday morning.

The little girl nodded, she then waited outside the 7/11 and watched as George filled a basket full of food designed to entice children and then she followed him back to his hotel. He spoke the whole way back but she wasn’t entirely sure what he was saying. All the time his voice sang a lullaby and her quiet ‘yeses’ and nods of her head seemed more than enough to keep George happy.

The hotel was less grand than Tia had hoped. Every day she would gaze into the gleaming hotel lobbies of Manila’s ubiquitous five-star hotels. She would see the finely dressed tourists and wish she could, just once, go into the hotel and enjoy its grandeur.

The lobby she followed George into belonged to a budget class hotel that didn’t have a star rating. They walked past the two coffee tables that had been placed outside the building and saw a further five inside. At each, a man, resembling George in many ways, held court. Each smoked; which over the years must have caused the thick yellow staining on the walls, and with each sat a smiling bar girl, doing her best to seem interested in whatever was being said.

George smiled at the girl on reception, who didn't return the gesture and only briefly looked up from her magazine long enough to offer him his room key.

They climbed the three flights to George's room. It was an act of exercise that once again took all George's breath, and entered the tiny double room.

'Sorry... it's... a... bit... small,' George offered. He was leaning against the bathroom door, trying to calm his breathing. Inside Tia could see a shower had been placed over the toilet and she wondered how you were meant to clean yourself in a room so impractical. Still, she couldn't remember the last time she had washed and she wasn't sure if she'd ever taken a shower.

'I'll get myself cleaned up and you can dig into this stuff.' George moved over to the bed, and emptied out the contents of the carrier bag. Chocolate bars, cola and crisps tumbled onto the bed, and Tia could hardly contain her excitement at the feast that lay ahead.

'Tuck in, you pretty little thing, and I'll be back in a second.' Tia didn't notice George lock the door and remove the key, she didn't even notice George go off to take a shower – she was gripped by hunger and George had bought enough food to keep her busy for hours, well at least ten minutes, but

certainly long enough for George to get cleaned up.

'I see you're enjoying that,' George said, fresh from the shower. He hadn't dressed; instead he had a red bath towel wrapped tightly around his waist. The little girl looked up at his fat sagging body, the gray hair that seemed to cover him like a woollen overcoat, and doubted that a hotel such as this, had supplied such a luxurious towel. But any thoughts of George's near nakedness soon passed as there was still food to eat.

As she opened her third chocolate bar, her eyes followed George to where he was now fishing inside his suitcase. He had two large, leather cases. They were well used and their worn texture reminded Tia of the old woman who had earlier caused the bruise on her face.

The case he was rummaging through was filled with girls' clothes. He seemed to be looking through the labels, as if they weren't all the same size. Tia didn't understand why George might need girl's clothes in a range of sizes; the question never entered her head. Instead, she just watched and hoped that soon enough one of the pretty, flowery dresses would be presented to her.

She didn't have to wait long. 'What about this one, a pretty dress for a pretty girl,' George said as he held up a bright white dress covered in vibrant red flowers.

‘For me?’ Tia asked without waiting for her mouth to empty of chocolate.

‘It is, but you can’t wear it until you’ve cleaned up. Finish eating then you can go take a shower and get changed.

The little girl looked at what remained of the food, then back at the bright new dress. She then stuffed in one more mouthful of chocolate and pushed the rest of the food to one side.

George handed her the dress and after showing her how the shower worked he left her to it.

Thick lumps of dirt streamed down the little girl’s body as she applied handful after handful of the rose scented shower gel George had given her. She scrubbed at her skin, having to scrape at parts of herself to free up the oily muck. Her body feeling clean she moved onto her hair and after three washes it regained a hair-like texture rather than that of old matted dreadlocks.

Finally, Tia just let the warm water pour over her. Her skin was a colour she hadn’t seen for a long time and her hair smelt like nothing she’d ever experienced.

'Are you ok in there?' George asked, his accompanying knock reminding Tia where she was.

'Fine, soon finish,' Tia called through the door and then, after reluctantly turning the shower off, she quickly dried herself and put on her new dress. Sadly there was no mirror in the bathroom. Looking down at herself, Tia could see she looked nice but she really wanted to see the dress in all its glory.

She rushed out of the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. George got off the bed and stood behind her – he had pulled on a pair of jeans, but still wasn't fully dressed.

'You look stunning, a picture of beauty!'

Tia had to agree, the dress fitted her gaunt frame perfectly. Her freshly scrubbed face looked rosy, and the cut the old woman had left had cleaned up to barely anything.

George took a step back and sat then sat down on the bed, he then lugged his large frame up the bed until his back was against the headboard. 'Why don't you come and sit up here with me and finish the food?' he said, nodding to his side and then to the bed's side table where he'd moved the food.

Tia took one last look at herself in the mirror and then took the place at George's side. She took a bag of crisps and, carefully this time, so not to make a mess of the dress, she began to eat.

The food was on the table at the side of Tia. This allowed George to reach across the little girl when he took food. He did this repeatedly, first for a chocolate bar, then for some crisps then for a cola. Each time, he rested his hand on Tia's shoulder, just for a second, but, each time, the little girl froze until the hand had been removed.

When George moved his hand for a fourth time, he didn't bother going for food, he just placed it on Tia's shoulder. 'You don't mind if I rest my hand here do you?' he asked.

Tia wanted to say that she did mind but there was still food left and she didn't want to upset him and have him take everything back.

His hand settled on her shoulder, George took his free hand and placed it on Tia's knee 'inacey wincey spider, climbed up the spout... one step, two steps...' as he spoke, George walked two of his fingers up Tia's leg, he walked them up past her skirt line and nearly to the top of her thigh. As he got to 'and tickley under there,' he jumped his fingers from a few centimetres below the child's groin up to her armpits in an attempt to make her laugh.

Tia forced a laugh. It was that or scream.

‘Did you like that?’ George asked. He smiled down at the small child. Long white hairs clogged his nose like dirty pieces of cotton wool. As he spoke Tia felt his breath on her face, it smelt like the first breath she had taken that morning, but without the church women’s perfume.

‘Don’t like being touched,’ Tia said. She reached for more chocolate; she was getting ready to run for the door and wanted to take some of the delicious food with her.

George reached down, put his hand on Tia’s thigh and said, ‘oh, you don’t have to worry about me little one. I’m not going to hurt you.’ As he spoke his little finger slid up and down the little girl’s thigh. It pushed against the beauty of the dress, moving slowly upwards.

Tia didn’t bother flinching this time, nor did she bother screaming. Instead, with a movement that startled George, she leap from the bed and ran for the door. In seconds she was there, yanking on the handle, pulling with all her tiny might, desperate to be free from the sickness she knew was coming.

The door didn’t open. This time Tia screamed, ‘help me, someone please help me.’

‘Tia, there’s no need for this.’ George was behind her. His mammoth frame blocked out what little light was entering the boxy room.

‘Let me go!’ Tia screamed.

George wrapped his fingers tightly around Tia’s arm, ‘come, sit down, we haven’t finished.’ He dragged the screaming girl over to the bed. She was flaying wildly, trying her best to punch and kick her way free. But her actions proved useless. Her tiny frame shook like a rag doll as George dragged her onto the bed. He pushed her forward and with one hand pinned her to the bed by her chest.

‘Please don’t do this,’ Tia said, for the first time anger giving way to tears.

‘Don’t worry, pretty Tia; this will be over soon enough. It’ll be easier if you don’t struggle.’ With his free hand George worked his fingers up and under the white flowery dress.

‘Is this because I tried to steal the collection money?’ Tia sobbed. ‘Please, I didn’t mean any harm. Please!’

George didn’t answer. His mind was full of purpose. He placed one knee at either side of Tia’s and moved his free hand from her thigh to his zipper. Tia screamed, this couldn’t

be happening. She raked her hands up towards George's eyes but he just pulled his head away and glared at the tiny girl. His face instilled fear, enough that she left his face alone and looked around for another means of escape.

She reached out, trying to find anything to use against her attacker. Her hands found the bedside table and fell on a heavy lamp. George fought with his zipper, losing his breath as he yanked at his jeans trying to pull them down to his knees. As he paused for a second to catch his breath, Tia moved her fingers up and over the thick base of the lamp. When she eventually reached the lamp's slender neck she wrapped her tiny hand around the heavy object. Then without hesitation, and empowered by anger, panic and fear she mustered all her strength, and smashed the lamp into the side of her attacker's head. The lamp shattered, cutting into George's head. Chunks of blue pottery covered the bed and floor, leaving only a handful of lamp left in Tia's hand.

George cried out in pain and fell to the floor. As he fell he grabbed Tia's dress and dragged her after him. Scared that the blow hadn't done enough damage, Tia fought to free herself. George held on and pulled them both to the ground. But as the fat man's body hit the white tiled floor, his head smashed backwards and the tiles finished the work the lamp had started.

George's dead body filled the space between the bed and the window. Tia, afraid to move, lay still on top of the fat man. She looked at his eyes. They had fallen back in his head, leaving only the whites to stare at her and accuse. George's body shook in death and then released his bowels, an action that mixed the stench of digested matter with the coppery smell of the blood that had formed a pool around the George's head.

Tia lay on top of near naked man, her tiny body lost against his flattened gut. As her senses started to return, the little girl realised where she was, she looked down at the man she'd killed and screamed as she pushed herself backwards and off his body. She kept moving backwards until a wall stopped her retreat, at which point she pulled her knees into her body, wrapped her hands tightly around them and rocked backwards and forwards.

She shut her eyes tight, praying that when she reopened them, she would be back lying with her mother. She would have never tried to steal from the church, and this day would never have happened. But when, eventually, she opened her eyes, George was still lying there in all his dead glory. Tia looked at the wound on his temple. Bits of lamp jutted out from the gash. Her eyes moved down his body. He'd managed to get his jeans and pants down to his knees. His weapon of choice was still hard. It rested against his stomach – twitching slightly.

The little girl cried. She lifted her hands to her face to cover her eyes but as she brought her hands up near her nose the coppery smell grew stronger. She looked at her hands, they were covered in blood. Some sticky, some still wet, still flowing. The pieces of lamp she'd yet to drop had cut deeply and only with this realisation came the pain the wounds deserved. Tia winced and cried some more.

She didn't know what to do. She wanted to run, but where could she go. She couldn't leave like this, covered in blood. She could change and go but George was a white man, a tourist. They would hunt her down.

'But, I didn't do anything,' Tia thought. The words screamed inside her head, they even formed on her lips but she dared not say them aloud - she knew they stood for nothing. Her mother had told her many times that she wasn't important, that none of the street people were.

Tia thought of her mother, wondered if she ran back to her if she could sort this all out. But the thought almost brought a laugh to the doomed girl's lips. Her mother was a drunk and if Tia even found her sober, all she would do was dish out a beating, and then whisk her off to the police to see if there was a reward.

Tia felt empty, alone. Her hand was bleeding freely now, dripping crimson onto the white tiles. She looked at the large shard of lamp she still held in her hand and saw a way out – the only way out.

She tried to think of her future, try to find some hope. But she could see nothing but misery. Her past had been hand-to-mouth. A constant battle to find food, keep the wandering hands of tramps at bay and survive through the night. She had often wished that the tranquillity of sleep would hold her in its grasp forever, and now knew that her only way out was to fall into its all encompassing darkness. A permanent sleep, free of the world and the hate it had forced upon her.

Picking up the makeshift knife Tia cut deep across the veins of her left wrist, and then quickly before the pain got too great, she repeated the process across her right. She was numb, and had hardly felt the blade cutting through her flesh. Her mind had given up, and as she rested her arms on her knees and watched the blood start to flow, she let her mind drift off to another place.

Tia was in her pretty dress, she was being led into one of the five- star hotels. Her feet were bare and the marble floor felt cold and clean under her feet. She looked around. There were plush settees covered in luxurious fabrics that just begged to be relaxed in. Everyone was smiling. The woman

behind the huge teak reception desk knew her name – Miss Tia – the smiling lady used it as she offered Tia the key to her room.

But as the life drained out of the little girl, hell came calling.

A flare of brilliant light flashed across Tia's mind and cleared away the images of the hotel. She was now outside the church; the scenes from earlier today about to play out. She heard the old woman's voice scream that she would go to hell. And, as the last vestiges of life drained out of her body, Tia saw hell – a final vision of a beaten and wasted life.
