

### **An excerpt from *Buddha was an Aries***

I assumed that everyone who came here had some kind of problem. The nature of Gina's issue was hard to guess. Depression? Drugs? She was what my mother called "rough". Ten years ago you might have called her a good-looking woman, but since then, her tattooed eyebrows and eyeliner, while not badly done, had sagged, so that her features were slightly misplaced and gave the air of a sad, jilted clown.

My mother had been worried. About safety, she claimed, but I knew better. She hadn't forgotten about the call. Two weeks ago, I had to ring her from Bangkok immigration because I had ticked "Yes" to all the questions on the entry form. You think it's embarrassing having your mother trying to bail you out from Thai border police, using her most offensive English For Third World countries? How about her telling them about how you had left your keys in the freezer? Or walked into a glass door, slicing your forehead open?

"My daughter not criminal," she said on speaker. "She crazy."

I told her we woke up at 4.30am and went to bed at 9.30pm. In between, we meditated, ate or rested according to a strict schedule, i.e., there was no time for wandering off. I also told her that men and women were segregated. This would appeal to her; she sent me rape news articles regularly.

"Everyone here is Buddhist," I said. "Or trying to be."

"Buddhists kill, too. Everyone kills. There is the potential."

The camp took place in a disused school, with three buildings arranged around a central courtyard. We slept five to a classroom, on the floor under noisy ceiling fans.

Later, Gina would claim that I was drifting “helplessly” under the building walkways and that I “refused” to return to the classroom. All I knew was one moment I was staring at the ceiling fan, and another moment I was looking at the base of some large container that loomed over me like a spaceship. A sense of pleasant strangulation turned out to an inflatable travel pillow around my neck. I was at the base of a ladder. That ladder, I would discover later, was warm to the touch, the same temperature as the water in the tank it led to, water which was piped to the rest of the building and used by the rest of the students for washing and drinking.

Gina’s face, framed by swinging wet hair, peered down from the top of the tank.

“Hello?” she said. “Can—you—hear—me?”