

*Dear Anh,*

*1974 – the year of the big flood in Queensland. I was a young school girl living in a town north of Brisbane. The bridges on both sides of the town flooded and the brown waters invaded the shops in the town centre. On the black and white tv news each night, scenes of invasion in Vietnam played out. I tried to imagine what it would be like if the North Vietnamese communists made it to my town. Where would I run to hide from them? Could I hide under the house, in the junk yard around the corner, in the forest along the river bank? Could I swim across the flooded river to safety?*

*In Vietnam, you were a young man, working at the airport, for the Americans, helping to maintain their airplanes and helicopters, they taught you how to speak English. From the mountains nearby, the enemy watched.*

*Our Australian friend who introduced us in 1997, my first time in Vietnam, told me a story. He said that one day not long after the war had ended, after the North had overrun and subdued the South and driven out the American imperialists, in the very early days before western tourists had discovered Vietnam, and when suspicion was high, you had a little hardware store selling nails and screws. A white man, a journalist perhaps, certainly a stranger, maybe a spy, asked you for directions to the post office. You replied to him in English. Someone overheard you speaking English. The next day the police came to your home and took you away. They put you in a jail cell at the police station. They kept you there for a month, questioning you every day. Who was the man you spoke to? What did you say to him? Was he a spy? Are you still working for the enemy?*

*You must have known about the re-education camps. You must have known people who had disappeared during those early post war years. You must have feared for your life and for the lives of your family. You were, I was told, eventually released and allowed to go home. You were so traumatised and terrified, that you would not leave your home for several months and dared not speak English for many years, even though gradually more westerners began to appear in your city and at least on the surface, officially, suspicion decreased.*

*This is why, it was explained to me, that your understanding of English was excellent even though your accent when you spoke was very difficult for my untrained ears.*

*That year, 1997, I met a man in the Kodak shop as I was collecting my processed photographs. He said to me, "Life is freer now, but not free enough."*

*If I visit again, will you tell me the story of your 1974, the year before the war ended?*

*Hen gap lai*

*(Until we meet again)*

*Jill*

*About the writer:*

*Jillian Brady is a writer with a day job as a librarian. She is Tasmanian born and bred, but grew up in Queensland and has been to Vietnam several times. She has had several articles and short stories published. She likes to travel and writes a blog called Wayward Wanderers.*