

To my dear friends in Vietnam,

I will not say your names. You tell me people watch you: indeed, I have seen them myself. The quiet ones, who sat at the back of our English classes and gave their names haltingly. You told me later that they were spies, sent to check that we weren't planning a government coup. I believe you. Your phones have been tapped and you've been followed. You hear stories of people disappearing: into nothing and for nothing.

I understand why you don't rise up against it. Why you keep your heads down, focussing on the moment. It's better now than it was. After the war, there were more things to subdue. The real jobs were not for you, but for the victors. The bell for you would ring at 4am – you told me – rousing you from your bed to the fields. Mindless planting and drudgery, making your brains dull, wearing the resistance out of you like a river over rock. Then there were the camps, where they'd remake you in their image.

I say you don't protest, but you do – in small ways. You refuse to join the party; you maintain your religion. Even when it puts you in danger. You talk: when it is safe. On the backs of motorbikes, where we cannot be overheard, you tell me your stories.

When I first heard you talk, I was outraged. You cannot leave the country: passports and visas are like hen's teeth (I love explaining English idioms to you). You live in fear, falling over every aspect of your lives like a darkness on even the brightest days, sitting by the lake, surrounded by mountains. Even when you seem happy. It makes me grateful for my freedom: to travel and to say what I think without fear.

You are afraid, but so are they. Fear drives so many things in this life. The people who work in government do not do so out of belief or loyalty. They are the ones sending their teenage children overseas, getting them out of the country they are supposed to love. They are the only ones who are able to do it.

I want to protest for you: to help you. But I worry that by sending more foreigners to help with your English, I am putting you in danger. When I visit, you thank me: but you have given me so much. My words have always been my action. I write this letter to stand with you.

All love, Emma

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Emma Chapman is the author of the critically acclaimed psychological thriller *How To Be A Good Wife*, which is a New York Times Notable Book, a Target Book Club Pick and a longlist-selected title for the Dylan Thomas Prize. She is currently working on her second novel, which is about a British war photographer's experiences during the Vietnam War. In 2012, Emma founded Vietnam Volunteer Teachers, an organisation which organises voluntary teaching placements in Vietnam. For more information, see [www.vietnamvolunteerteachers.com](http://www.vietnamvolunteerteachers.com)