

Behind the Book

In 1996, my husband, Todd, and I rented a Ryder Van, stuffed all the contents of our San Francisco apartment inside, and drove from to North Carolina, where he was taking a job as an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. I can't say I was happy about the move. In fact, I loved San Francisco, and, because my writing focused on issues related to Vietnam, I loved living in a place with a large Asian community. However, travel always inspires me, and during those long hours in the van I kept thinking about a conversation I'd had recently with a friend whose mother had run a funeral home. The way that she managed to live a normal, happy life, despite the sadness of her profession, made me think of people I'd met in Vietnam, who also managed to live on, despite the traumas of their pasts. I began to wonder how two different people, with some oddly similar life experiences, might respond to each other. Mile by mile, Shelley and Mai, and their friendship, began to develop.

It took me about ten years to complete the book (with some sidetrips into other writing projects and motherhood in between) and, during those years, I travelled to Vietnam several times. In 2003, I made a two-week trip to Hanoi specifically to do research for my novel. I stayed at the Claudia Hotel, which was at that time a popular place for people adopting children from Vietnam (and it serves as a model for the Lucinda in my book). I met a number of adoptive mothers and was able to observe a Giving and Receiving ceremony, during which time children become legally adopted by their new families.

The most magical moment on that trip was a very personal one. I had a vague idea for a location for Mai's house in Hanoi, on a street I knew from the map but hadn't visited. One day, I took a walk down the street, just to look at it. Back at home in the States, I had written a description of the neighborhood and house from my imagination: a narrow lane, an old pagoda, and, in the courtyard of the house, a huge banyan tree. As I walked around a bend, I saw, on my left, a beautiful old pagoda, half hidden behind an enormous banyan tree. I turned to my right and saw a narrow lane, exactly like the one in my imagination. I don't want to say that I'm psychic. Rather, something happened that, for a fiction writer, is much more important. I had already spent seven years writing Mai's story, but it wasn't until that moment that Mai herself suddenly became real to me.