

Isabelle-“I Can Do It”

By Vincent Ferry

The second time we met Isabelle, we visited her at her parent’s home where she decided to show us the places in her neighbourhood from her childhood, called Haut du Lièvre . Her parents have lived there since 1983 and according to Isabelle, the flat has never changed. She showed us the bedroom she used to share with her sister and recounted memories while we were in it. She described her childhood as rather happy, dividing her time between school, play, friends and family. The youngest of a family of four children, Isabelle is the only one among her siblings to have been born in France and to have been given a French name. This is because her parents, of Sino-Laotian origin, acquired refugee status when Isabelle was born.

Between the first and the second time we met her, Isabelle asked her parents to describe their story. The story they told was that of individuals with Chinese nationality and a Laotian cultural background, whose lives had been torn by the wars which plunged the Indochinese Peninsula into bloodshed between 1941 to 1978. The borders between imperial China and the French colonies (Cochinchina, then Indochina) had been drawn regardless of the villages and their inhabitants. Laotians had been separated by a border. In fact Laotians– who became independent in 1954 – were allowed to circulate on either side of the border for a century. The closure of the border by communist China, when the United States bombed Laos, in 1969, entrapped Isabelle's parents within a country caught up in the violence of a war which would last until 1972.

The chaos caused by the war, the fear of dying, of seeing one's village be destroyed by napalm bombings, pushed Isabelle's grandparents to organise the wedding of their children, a wedding which could be seen as a way of ensuring the family's, the tribe's survival. From the day they got married, Isabelle's parents would move from village to village as those of their own parents were no longer safe and could no longer provide them with regular work. It was under poor sanitary conditions, in the middle of the rain forest, that Isabelle's oldest brothers and sisters were born and grew up. With the United States leaving Vietnam – which would become communist in 1975 – the Khmer Rouge took over power and organised the Cambodian genocide, Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978, Laos decided to close its borders and expel all foreign citizens, among whom were Isabelle's parents. In Thailand, the only country accessible, Isabelle's parents, with three young children, experienced refugee camps. Completely overflowed with the influx of tens of thousands of individuals leaving Cambodia, Thailand indeed confined these refugees in camps, without offering them any humanitarian solutions. Because these territories were former French colonies, the French Parliament decided in 1977 to welcome 150, 000 refugees.

While Isabelle told us this story, her mother came in and offered offered us some tea. We then tried to pick up the conversation where we left off but the memories of the camps were too painful to go any further.



Isabelle then showed us around her neighbourhood, the school she attended, the shops she went to as a child, the buildings where she and all her friends lived. She discussed memories of her childhood with such peace of mind. She told us that she had a happy childhood at school, but that she had to make the final choice to leave her neighbourhood and change schools because, as she reached adolescence, she understood that her neighbourhood had a bad image:

“when I was an adolescent, I didn't like living in the neighbourhood at all because I had the impression that we would be stigmatised and I really wanted to leave it.”

Isabelle continues to explain how her impression of her neighbourhood changed over time and the reasons why she chose to leave:

“I had a different vision then. It's pretty obvious that when you're part of the neighbourhood, you're safe, you feel good, you know everyone... but I think that I really wanted to leave the neighbourhood and avoid being stigmatised as being part of it... but then, you're influenced by the image that outsiders have, which means that there is an image of the neighbourhood from within and another one from without.”

Beyond these images, she thinks that, today, more needs to be done for the people living in the neighbourhood. For her, the renovation of the “Haut du Lièvre” was just a smokescreen, an illusion.



What needs to be done is to bring solutions to people, to their problems, to provide them with jobs. She considers her job as a psychologist to be her own answer to help those in difficulties. She considers that mental suffering can be linked to material suffering, to the fact that one is rejected because he or she cannot find a job. When talking about her childhood friends, she realises that each has followed a different path but that all have opted for jobs fostering a sense of solidarity as a way of giving back to those who suffer from what diversity has brought them.

“I have the impression that one of the assets of having grown up in my neighbourhood is that I have learnt to share, I have learnt tolerance. I think I have. With my friends, we sometimes laugh about it because we've all followed the same path... well... I have a friend who's a social worker, another one who's about to become a nurse, another one who wanted to be a youth worker but who has opted for religion. We all have the same impression, the impression that having grown up in a place with so many different cultures... well, that it is no coincidence if we've chosen these jobs.”

Isabelle ended the conversation by mentioning her current life situation, that she feels great, totally French, at a time when she is rediscovering her Chinese origins. When looking back, she says that she does not regret anything.