

My Little French Village

The Bench

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Jill

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CHAPTER 9

THE BENCH

As an activity, bench sitting plays an important role in the daily life of the Monflanquinois. To earn the right to sit guilt-free for hours on a bench in Monflanquin, one must either be retired, infirm, or in our case, a pretending retired French person, in the body of an American, owning a house in France. I suspect this rule applies to other French villages as well.

Extensive research shows that bench sitting is performed by more women than men. However, certain restrictions do apply to all. For example, no eating, drinking, or busywork on the bench except by Americans. No bench sitting during the heat of the day. One must be fully clothed and fully prepared to greet people one has known all one's life as well as total strangers, pets, and small children delighting in pulling leaves off the vines climbing the façade of your home. One must be at the ready to jump off the bench, shake hands, kiss cheeks, or gesticulate wildly at something curious happening down the street. Finally, one may not sit on another's bench without prior invitation.

Upon our arrival in Monflanquin, we notice our neighbor Denise enjoying a great deal of quality time on the bench located in front of her home. Usually with her, sits her dear friend and neighbor Mazarine. People pass by, wave, smile, and say hello. Everybody knows Denise. She grew up in the village and spent the years before her retirement working in the mayor's office. Denise never married, but does not lack for companionship. The village loves her!

We love her as well. Our incredibly good luck at having the village angel for our neighbor still astounds me. We could have easily been bitten with a meddling old busybody or a narrow minded person suspicious of foreigners or even a major grouch. Denise unquestioningly accepts our house partnership, a form of ownership unusual in France. She sees six owners come and go throughout the year, holiday renters, and a barrage of French students and friends. She greets everyone politely, encourages them to speak French, and compliments any and all effort to use the language.

Warning us of impending storms and changes in alternate side of the street parking regulations, Denise looks out for all of us. Of course as you may know, I consult her about everything. Who do I call about the latest house problem? What to serve to two French people visiting from nearby Monpazier at 4 P.M. that afternoon? Have a question? Ask Denise. Knowing she's my neighbor helps me sleep better at night.

Denise also serves as a one woman genealogical society. As she fills

me in on who's who in Monflanquin, the bits and pieces fuse together to complete the village tree. Ironically, Denise herself is one of the people I know least. Due to the French respect for privacy, I don't dare ask too many personal questions. Yet, we are buddies, and we sigh and laugh together as buddies do.

Now, I must reveal the most surprising thing about Denise. You'll never guess. She drives a snazzy red Miata. As we say in Brooklyn, go figure.

