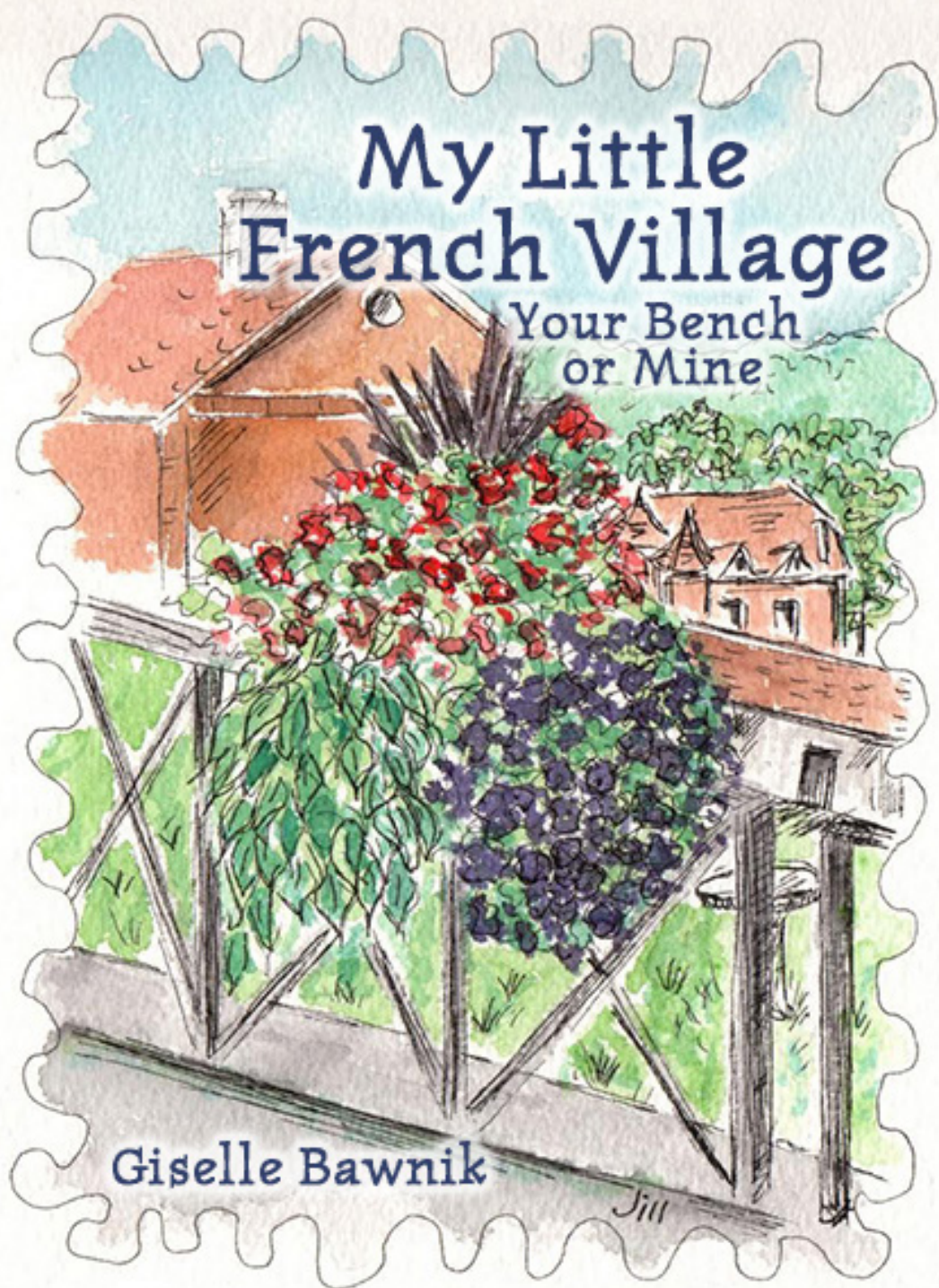


My Little French Village

Your Bench
or Mine

Giselle Bawnik

Jill



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CHAPTER 10

YOUR BENCH OR MINE?

Bill wakes up one morning and declares that like Denise we need a front bench. Usually, we sit on our front stoop. To achieve this position requires an energetic lowering of stiffening middle aged bodies, increasingly more challenging holding a cup of coffee or glass of wine. Actually, it would be really nice to have a bench of our own. Bill promises to get us a bench next summer.

As you know by now, Bill or Monsieur Bricolage never shies away from a handy man project. After all, it is his *raison d'être* in Monflanquin. A thoughtful bricoleur, Bill contemplates several approaches to the bench. He could find a bench in the states, ship it, or check it with his luggage, and assemble it in France. Alternatively, he could build a bench from scratch. Ambitious, but in theory possible. Or buy a bench at the French equivalent of Home Depot.

One afternoon, a bench shows up on our deck at our home in Beaverton. A nice looking bench with “an imagine me in France look.” All it needs is a shipping label with a French address. Before his next trip to France, Bill studies the bench for weeks. I do not remember him revealing the inner workings of his bricolage mind, but finally he comes to a conclusion. Our bench is too much of a pain to transport or ship. He would get a bench in France. How hard could it be? Everyone has one.

Summer in Monflanquin. Perfect weather for Bill to shop for a bench. First stop, the local Gifi. Imagine K-Mart without blue light specials. What? Sold out! Not a bench left in the store. Undaunted, Bill gets back into his rental car and drives to LeClerc in Villeneuve-sur-lot, the closest one stop shopping mecca. What? No benches available. Why does everyone in France suddenly need a bench? At this point, Bill decides to take a little sightseeing break and drive over to Perigord. Hey, wait a minute! Isn't that a Gifi just off the auto route? Perigord can wait. Maybe he would find his bench here. The saleswoman attempts to help Bill. “Yes, we have a bench left, but it is the floor model.” Employing an American tactic, Bill offers to buy it. What! Becoming slightly hysterical, the woman cries “ce n'est pas possible, Monsieur!” Floor models are not sold in France.

At this point, Bill too is feeling slightly hysterical. However, his Midwestern determination kicks in. There has got to be a bench somewhere in the area. Now, I want to express some long overdue admiration for my husband. The guy is hunting for a bench with only the most rudimentary knowledge of French. He presses on.

Days pass. No bench. The house distracts Bill with other demands. The weather is turning almost unbearably hot. It's hard to get anything done. Finally, one day, Bill decides to visit another town. In this town's Gifi, there sits an available bench. Yes! However, one challenge overcome, another awaits. Due to the sloping nature of our stoop, the back legs of the bench need to be cut so that the bench can sit properly up against the front of the house. Bill measures and succeeds in achieving the desired result. Yes! When I arrive in Monflanquin, the new bench greets me with many possibilities. I can knit, read, chat, and people watch. I can sip wine or drink coffee. Thanks to Bill, our status and comfort in the village has grown.

Denise admires our bench and deems it superior to her own. "That can't be, I assure her," "Your bench is perfect." We talk about bench security. I really can't get behind the idea that a person would bother stealing a bench. Then again, taking it might be easier than driving all over this region of France to purchase one.

Feeling quite French, I graciously invite Denise to sit on the bench with me. In the days and weeks to come, our bench becomes the chosen place to escape the oppressive heat. It is even too hot to sit on our rooftop terrace. Before our departure from Monflanquin, we take our final good-bye pictures on the new bench with Denise and a couple of friends. One of the women comments that our bench is superior to Denise's. "Oh, no!" I cry. "Oh, yes, she insists" "Our bottoms have become quite round. Your new bench gives our derrières a little more room." There is nothing to say to that one.

