

# Small Towns

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When Jacques Jaillet was a small boy, he brought home a pocketful of sand from the seaside and dribbled it slowly onto the floorboards of his little room. He made long avenues and cottage roofs, rows of shops, garden walls, a church with a fragment of shell for the tower. Then, for no reason he could later recall, he took a deep breath and blew it all away, the shapes and the order, the grains themselves skittering under the baseboard, gone forever.

When Jacques returned to his market town in 1918, past his middle years, it looked as if here, too, a monstrous child had finished playing and had blown the town, the streets, the houses and shops from the face of the Earth.

The other villagers reacted in several ways to the sight: they raged against God or the Germans; they started salvaging or appropriating what they could; or they began soberly to plan, to rebuild.

Jacques did none of these things.

“Of course, what do you expect?” said Héloïse, whose widowhood had left her the town innkeeper. “He has never had a place in the world that mattered. A toymaker! Who wants toys now, in a world like ours?”

It was true, Jacques had once been a toymaker, as had his father and grandfather. Most recently, he had made wooden grips for rifles in a factory. He had never been a soldier — though men older than he had taken up arms — or a husband, or a father. He had been a son and a brother, but neither parents nor sister had returned with him.

“He is like a child,” the village matrons said, and perhaps they were right.

But the other burghers saw Jacques as a man like themselves. At first, they consulted him in the town plans. “Look, Jaillet, at the sketch for the new church. It will be even greater, more beautiful than what we have lost,” M. LeBoeuf, the baker, said.

“Why must it be greater?” said Jacques, staring at the corner of church wall standing in the shattered debris of the square.

“And once we clear the route and fill in the tunnels and trenches,” M. Leclerc urged, “see how wide and straight we will make the road into town. The town square will be bigger, and at the center, a memorial for our lost.”

“But why must it be bigger?” Jacques asked, as he always asked, and in time the town worthies stopped consulting him. They helped him erect a new shop a few meters back from its original foundations — the street must be wider, of course. When he was installed in the living apartments behind the shop and had hung a sign newly painted with the words “Jaillet Jouets,” they felt they had done a good thing by the man, who had become old before his time. A good thing for the new town: open shops, a return to normal. Certainly no one was thinking of toys at present, but there would be a time for that. Everyone knew once more that there would be a future.



In June of 1904, in a little town in the midst of France, Mlle. Aude Perrot was brought to bed of a most remarkable child. She had not known she was pregnant until the pains began — she was, as she’d always been, thin as a wisp. As she was unmarried, Aude was unsure what to do. She lay in her bed, sweating and praying, until her friend Georgine knocked at her door. Georgine had experience in these matters, so Aude took her arrival for an occasion of Divine Providence.

Georgine was a large woman in height and manner, and quite far-sighted, whereas the smaller Aude was short-sighted from focusing on her stitchery. Usually, their conversations looked like a pair of birds working out a point of precedence,

one lunging and the other backing. But now Aude was too tired to peer, and was content for Georgine to hover at a hazy arm's length.

"It's impossible, Aude."

"I assure you it's not."

"Well, it can't be nine months, just look at you!"

"I know spinster seamstresses have a reputation," Aude said with a gasp, "but I assure you it can *only* be 40 weeks!"

Georgine paused, trying to remember any visitors to town at that time.

"Georgine! Help me!"

"Oh, of course," she said, and some while later, she was squinting ruefully at a tiny shape. "You see I was right, it's no bigger than my thumb!" She made as if to gather up the linens, but Aude stopped her.

"I want to see my baby."

"It's not a baby, dear," Georgine shrugged, handing the nest of fabric across.

"Then what is it?"

"A misfortune evaded," Georgine said, and shut the door of the cottage behind her.

Aude looked at the form, afloat on seas of fabric. She knew it had been nine months and more since the traveling draper left. And to her the shape did not look unfinished. It looked like a baby. She leaned closer and her breath fell on the pink legs, each no thicker than a pencil. The baby shivered, turned onto her back, and started to cry.

Aude almost dropped the little girl, so great was her surprise, but then she smiled and covered her daughter with a tobacco-silk. "Don't cry, my little flower. I won't let you come to harm."

Aude named the child Fleur and made her a crib from a tea-tin. With the careful fingers that had rolled the edges of wedding veils and feather-stitched the lightest of christening gowns, Aude bathed and cared for the mite, and she grew. Soon she would grip the end of a pin and draw its glass head into her mouth to teethe.

Aude worried. Once a great circus had visited a nearby town, and she had seen a little man there. But hadn't they said he had been born an average size? Her Fleur was another matter entirely. She shuddered to think of her in the hubbub and hurry of a circus, perhaps kept in a cage like a bird. No, for Fleur's own sake, as well as Aude's, Fleur must remain her mother's little secret.



Jacques stocked his new shop with toys from factories in England and France, now turning their works to peaceful occupations. Those toys he had saved from before the war, before his own stint as a refugee worker in a factory, he placed on a shelf above the register. Below these relics — an elephant with a howdah, a clockwork touring car, and a marionette he had made himself — a sign in tidy Copperplate read “Pas à vendre”: not for sale.

He wanted to rebuild his woodshop in a shed behind the store, but with all the rebuilding going on, tools were at a premium. He did not have the belt-driven lathe, the array of paints and finishes, to do what he used to do. So Jacques took the tools he had kept in his old suitcase and made what he could. Delicate biplanes of wood and paper to satisfy the lads who were disappointed Jacques did not carry toy guns. A few wooden blocks, less vivid than before.

He could not make the dolls and marionettes that he used to, not with the same quality, so he started to make a doll house instead, out of the soft woods that he could shape with a knife. It was very crude, just a wood shack. It reminded him of the work shed behind the old shop where he had learned to make toys, where he and Papa had left the painted toys to dry far from his mother's sensitive nose. His hands shook as he looked at it, this small haphazard image of the way things had been before destruction and death had visited his town. He put it down on the table where he ate his meals, and fenced off the land around it with his hands. His rough fingers traced the vanished village streets with the precision of an aerial photograph.



Fleur grew up privately, quietly. She was never allowed out to play, for her mother feared she would be seen, or stepped on, or eaten by a terrier. Instead she stayed inside and learned to sew with the very smallest of her mother's needles, which was more like the shuttle of a great loom in her hands. Aude's reputation for fine work, already considerable, grew and grew. "It's as if it was embroidered by fairies," a woman breathed as she picked up a silk blouse she'd ordered, and Aude wondered if it was really safe to let Fleur's stitches be seen.

The only time Fleur felt sure of a trip outside the house was on Sunday, when she would ride to church in her mother's hat or muff. Aude wanted to be sure her daughter's soul was safe, whatever size it might be. She taught Fleur her catechism, and at the proper age arranged a crumb of Eucharist.

Father Robert, to whom Aude had of course confessed both the affair of the roving draper and the result, said she should not hide the girl away so, that she was miraculous, an evidence of God's infinite power and invention that all the townsfolk should see. But to Aude this religious exhibition sounded too much like the sort of exhibition she most feared. So the priest kept Aude's secret, and from time to time Fleur was lifted up to the grate to lay down the small sins a child may accumulate in such restricted circumstances.

And so Fleur grew, a very sheltered bloom, to the age of 15 and a height of nearly 20 centimetres. She knew almost nothing of the war. Her mother had taught her to read, of course, and brought her improving books. Fleur walked over the pages as she read, and turned each as if she were airing a great sheet. But these sorts of books, and the bright half-forgotten history Aude passed on from her own memories of school, gave Fleur little context or concept of war. She had spent a morning scaling a bureau so that she could press her face to the lace curtains and watch the young men marching to the railway station. So far away, they seemed her own size.

Now though, the war was over, the young men gone, and Fleur could think only of her mother, who was getting weaker each day as if all the sleep in the world

could not refresh her. The doctor came at last, and Fleur was obliged to hide in the cupboard that was her bedroom. Though she pressed against the pierced door, she could not hear the sense in the man's rumbling voice. When he left, Aude would tell her nothing.

Fleur cared for her mother as well as she could, and read to her each night from the Bible before climbing the nightstand and reaching on tiptoe to turn the knob of the lamp.

"Wait, petite Fleur," said Aude one night, "we must talk."

"Are you finally going to tell me what is happening?"

Aude sighed. "If I must. Dear girl, I am dying. I will no longer be here to protect and care for you."

"Dying? Is there nothing that—"

"Nothing. So you see there is only one thing I can do. I must send you North to live with my parents."

"What? Send me away when you need me most?"

"When I am gone, what will you do? How will you make your way alone across the kilometres to your grandparents?"

Fleur had no reply — indeed, she did not know how far a kilometre might be. "My place is with you."

"For a long and happy time, so it has been. You have been a joy and a blessing to me, my miracle. But this is my last request, my dear, a last kindness you can do to ease my passing."

Fleur knew she could not refuse now, and she bowed her head.

"I am already too weak to take you there, so I have prepared this box." Aude brought a wooden box out from under the bed, such as you might ship wine or sausage in.

"Mother! You want to send me off in a box like...like an onion?"

"I've made it very comfortable! See the cloth tacked to the slats inside will allow you air and privacy, there's plenty of food..."

Fleur knew she had agreed to go, but she could not help protesting further. "How long will the trip be? What will I do in there, in this cage?"

Aude burst into tears. “Can you not trust your mother to think of you and keep you safe?”

“Of course, Maman, of course.” Fleur hiked up her skirts and scrambled into the crate through the top, where the canvas was not yet secured. “I will go, as you ask.”

Aude gave her daughter a St. Christopher’s medal, which could have served her as a plate as well as it would as protection. She handed in Fleur’s particular treasures — a homemade rosary of seed beads, a doll’s comb. At her daughter’s insistence, she lowered in scraps of muslin and batiste, a needle and thread so that the girl would have something to do. Then, wetted by her mother’s giant tears and final kisses, Fleur was sealed in.

The moment Aude drove in the tacks, Fleur regretted her acquiescence. How could she leave her mother to die with only blunt Georgine and vague Father Robert beside her? She kicked the crate, and her mother said, “Hush, dear. You don’t want anyone to hear you!”

“Don’t I?” Fleur wanted to say, but the time for argument had passed. The crate shook as Aude hobbled to the windowsill and set it down. In the diffuse light, Fleur surveyed her prison.

Two rabbit-lined gloves of some age lay against one wall for a bed and much of the space was given to a block of cheese and a packet of crackers. Secured to the slats with loops of twine were several spice jars of water. Next to the bed there was a chest of drawers made of match-boxes. She opened the bottom drawer first: still full of matches. The second held all her carefully sewn shirts, the third underthings. The top one contained a doll’s mirror to match her comb, and a small pearl-handled pen-knife. She knew her mother meant these as a thoughtful touch, final gifts, but all Fleur could think was how long ago her mother must have planned this, how long she had known and not told her.

She lay back on the bed of gloves and heard a crinkle. Investigating, she found an envelope within the bottom glove. Tugging with all her weight, she pulled it out far enough to read “Maman et Papa” on the outside. She replaced the letter and listened to Georgine arrive for her daily visit. Aude’s voice, low and marred by

cough, must be explaining about the package. The box lurched and Fleur clung to the side.

“Your parents? I thought you’d never reconcile with them,” Georgine’s voice said, very close.

“Be careful!” Aude cried, and Fleur knew she wasn’t calling to Georgine. “Farewell!”

‘Adieu,’ she had said, not ‘au revoir.’ She would never see Fleur again. The girl muffled her sobs in the warm rabbit fur.

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“What do you do in there?” asked Mme. Tailler, Jacques’ neighbor, waving her umbrella at the back room.

“I’m making toys,” he replied, “just as I’ve always done.”

“Nonsense!” she swept her umbrella along the shelves. “Balloons, marbles — manufactured goods, that’s what you sell, and quite right too. If I tried to keep on making Directoire dresses or mutton sleeves, how do you think I’d do? Move with the times—”

“I have the goods, you see them.”

“I see them, but I don’t see you. You’re hiding back there,” the old widow said. “You were a dreamy child, Jacques, and now you’re a man floating off in a dream.” She rapped on his glass counter with a thimbled finger. “Right here, your town, your neighbors, your customers — that’s what’s important.”

Jacques mumbled something that sounded compliant, and the old woman kissed his cheeks and rattled away.

The shop did have some of his wares: a toy sailboat no one had bought, a row of his biplanes. He had not lied to Mme. Tailler, exactly.

He remembered the old house where the Tailleurs had lived, one shop further away than the widow did now. How many windows had it had upstairs? Counting to himself, Jacques withdrew behind the bright curtain that separated the store from what was important.





Fleur lay on the gloves, trying to construct the world outside her parcel from fragments. The voice of the postal clerk, as low as the bassoon on Mother's phonograph records. Darkness, rumbling, vast rocking shocks that left her clinging to the slats of her box as if to the timbers of a storm-tossed ship.

Ships she had heard of, and the storm that dogged Jonah, but she had few other analogues for her journey. She crouched in the darkness, saw her little room rendered strange and ominous by the chemical flare of her match, but she did not know of torches and forbidden tombs. She lay back in her rabbit fur luxury and watched the play of light on her canvas from some open window. She longed to reach somehow beyond these walls, to redraw herself as someone brave or interesting. She settled for praying, and tried to remember the stories of imprisoned martyrs, alone save for God. Since she could remember no dramatic details, she soon tired of the task.

Fleur cut a slit in a corner, on what she judged to be the downhill side, and used it to empty her chamber pot. After several days of waiting, rumbling and occasional upsets, she was bold enough to cut another slit above her bed so she could crouch and look out. At first all she could see in the gloom was a box nearby, streaked with grease, then a pile of envelopes tied with twine. The universe of the truck shuddered and jarred and Fleur was thrown about. She landed a hair's breadth from the open pen-knife. "God save me," she muttered, vexed at her own foolishness, and put the knife away in the chest of drawers.

She bent to the eye-hole again, like her mother kneeling for confession, and peered out. The piles of mail had shifted, and she stared in fascination at the back of the driver's head, visible against the pale truck ceiling. Was it a boy? She had never seen one so close. The ears stuck out from under the brown hair, and the neck was spotty with pimples. Then the head turned, and she caught the flash of an earring, the swing of hair hanging to chin length. A girl.

Fleur ducked down as if afraid of being discovered, and snuggled into her odd bed, both more uncertain and more comfortable at being driven into the future by someone so like herself.

The next morning Fleur awoke less sad and more angry than she had felt for many days. Her limited diet and the close air had left her feeling ill, and for the first time she imagined her grandparents opening the parcel and finding only a curious corpse.

She unearthed the letter to “Maman et Papa,” determined to find clues about the family she fancied she’d never live to see. All she found was stiff formality, lies about a husband dead in the war and a pile of hoarded franc notes. “She has to pay them to keep me!” Fleur said, and pushed the letter back into its envelope with little care.

This truck ride seemed to be coming to a halt. Sun blanched the canvas ceiling, and voices bantered back and forth. Someone swore — though she did not know the words Fleur heard the tone — and she thought guiltily of her chamber pots.

“This one’s soiled as well, just here,” a man boomed, tilting Fleur’s ark so that the bits of cheese rolled into her bed and against her skirts.

“Who’s it for?”

“M. et Mme. Perrot, the Poplars. Fragile.”

The other man snorted. “As if there are any trees standing around here! Don’t know of any Perrots either. We’ll ask the old man.”

A few bumps later, Fleur heard a wheeze: “Perrots? There were Perrots, yes, before the war. The Poplars.”

“And now?”

A cough. “They’re gone! No poplars, no Perrots.”

“Another mystery package for the vault,” the first man said.

Fleur listened for the clang of an iron door shutting her in to starve, but the sound that came was the ordinary sort of wooden thud. The thundering footsteps receded, and Fleur’s ears ached with the silence, the first real silence in what she swore was weeks. She lay back and forgot her fear, her grief, her anger at her

mother, everything in the joy of silence, like bathing — oh, how she longed to! — in pure water. Soon she was fast asleep.

It was dark when she awoke, and all her fears returned. It sounded as if her mother hadn't even sent her to the right place, and now she was alone, locked in perhaps, with no one to direct her. She indulged in a cry, then shook herself and stood to assess her situation.

She still had almost two full jars of water and quite a bit of stale cracker. The cheese was only growing mold at one edge. She could stay here until the food ran out, but she couldn't bear the thought. She ate a last meal. Then, moving deliberately in the near-darkness, she stripped to her greasy skin and washed with the jar of thyme-scented water, chafing herself red and peeling away the tear-salt, the cheese, the grime. She cut the jar free and tipped it over to pour out the very dregs, rinsed her hair and slapped her face with the drops.

After drying herself with a scrap of muslin, she put on the floating white dress she had made, in which she had hoped to greet her grandparents. It was her only clean garment. She combed and braided her hair and packed the mirror and comb into a crude bag that would hold her last matches, the direction and return from her mother's letter, and the franc notes, rolled small. When she was ready to leave she drank her fill of the mint-water. Then, pack over her shoulder and pen-knife in hand, Fleur cut a door in the heavy canvas and emerged.

She had taken only three steps when the springy substance beneath her fell away and she slipped down an oiled paper slope with a scream. Luckily, she still had a firm hold on her pen-knife, and even as the hard floor loomed into view, she managed to break her fall by stabbing the nearest package. Her sack fell past her and landed with a tinkling sound. Carefully she found holds for hands and feet, folded the knife, and clambered down with only a few bruises and a torn peplum. She retrieved her meager belongings, slung them over her shoulder and surveyed the world.

The world was a room larger than her mother's cottage, the walls lined with shelves and the floor piled with boxes. Fleur's package had been placed on top of such a pyramid, near the door. Eagerly Fleur made for it, but it offered her no

escape. The space below was only high enough for her arm to pass beneath. She beat against it for a few minutes and imagined she would starve in here, her bones taken for those of a mouse.

As if the thought, or her pounding, had summoned it, Fleur heard the sound of clawed feet, a bare tail slithering on the floorboards. No mouse. A rat. The creature was as long as she was tall, and bulky with the spoils of the post's failures. Fleur fumbled the pen-knife from her belt, backing away as she saw the brute step into a rectangle of moonlight between them.

Yes, a rectangle. There was a window. Fleur ran toward it, the beast on her heels. She wheeled at the base of the shelf and flicked the knife at the rat, drawing a red-welling line on its gathered snout. It recoiled, and Fleur jumped for the shelf, pulled herself up and didn't look back.

She didn't know whether rats could climb or how well, so she just kept on, skinning her knees on crates of wine and pushing her pack ahead of her onto rough wood shelves. She had lived a quiet life, never taking part in the running games she had seen outside her window, but if there was one activity in which she excelled, it was scaling furniture. Now she used all the skill and strength she had built, and it was enough. She gained the windowsill and pushed the single pane open on its creaking hinge. She stepped into the boughs of a yellow-leafed pear tree, leaving behind her the prints of two small hands on the glass, traced with blood.

Fleur made her way to the ground, breathing in the night air: shockingly fresh, rich with the smells of soil and decaying leaves. In the middle of the new roadway she stood, the bright full moon leaving her colorless and carved on the world like a bas-relief. A wind whipped her petal-thin skirts against her legs and Fleur realized how exposed she was, and how cold. She had no heavier clothing, no other clothing at all now. She thought longingly of the rabbit-lined gloves left behind to mold, but there was no helping it now. Fleur put her head down and ran toward the looming buildings of the town.

Fleur had never seen a town from this perspective, or indeed any town but her own, so it was hard to get her bearings. In what she guessed was the town

square she found an empty slab surrounded by fresh plantings, and from this vantage was able to see the church.

“Let the little children come to me,” thought Fleur, rubbing her hands over her goosefleshed arms. “There can be no smaller children than I,” and she let herself heavily down onto the pavement once more, to venture toward the church.

Her legs ached with effort and stung with cold, and it was hard to make her way to the great church door, impossible to move it. She pounded against the wood until her fists burned out of their numbness. Somehow she imagined any moment her own priest would appear to accept her into the warm house of God.

But no one came. Fleur lay down to peer beneath the door and saw no light, electric or candle. She smelled paint, and rose to find her whole body covered with building dust.

Fleur sat down on the broad step and began to pray. “What am I to do? I am in your hands, as I have ever been.” She remembered her mother’s warm, needle-pricked hands enclosing and cradling her, and her voice failed her.

Fleur might have stayed there, freezing in the mild October night, if she had not felt eyes upon her. She opened her own and saw a cat’s eyes among the leaves of a privet bush, reflecting the moonlight back to her. She would have said she was too tired even to stand, but she was on her feet and running before she had thought, jumping down the church steps and landing hard at the bottom. She could not hear the cat, but then again, she wouldn’t, not with her own feet and heart so loud. She barked her shin, stumbled, came up running. She had lost her pen knife and the bag knocked loose against her side. Cold air sliced her throat. Her churning legs felt heavy and strange.

Something collided with her, and she fell on grass, curled into a ball. The cat was on her, breath reeking of digested meat. It batted her again and did not startle at her scream. The animal picked her up in its jaws, and somehow she knew that it would shake her and that would be the end.

“Blanche-Neige!” a man called, only a few metres away. “Blanche-Neige!”

Still suspended from the creature’s fangs by her dress, Fleur felt the trotting motion of its gait, and realized this nightmare beast must be Blanche-Neige, for it

certainly was as white as snow. With her next desperate squirm she felt her dress tear. She fell heavily. The cat gave a startled mew, and Fleur began to crawl away. She heard the man's voice say, "There you are, you wicked cat. Who will rub your tummy if you stay out all night?"

The footfalls receded; a door shut, then another, and Fleur looked up at the lit windows of a cottage.

It was the only light other than the moon she had seen for hours, and she stumbled toward it, that warm yellow light that cast streaks of colors onto the chill garden — a green stem here, a red leaf there. She climbed into a flower-box and pressed her face against the glass. There, in the empty room, was a church, and a flower stall, and a bakery, a grocery, a tobacconist's, a toy shop and a tailor's — a whole village no more than 50 centimetres high.



Jacques woke in the morning, stared at his ceiling, and clomped downstairs to make coffee. Blanche-Neige was scratching at the larder door with unusual vigor, but Jacques paused with his hand on the latch.

A thread of smoke was curling from the chimney of the model tailor's shop. A more practical man might have envisioned fire spreading across his miniature world, destroying his village a second time, but Jacques merely crept closer and peered into the tiny house. Now he might well regret the old-fashioned nature of the houses with their small windows, but he was patient. He saw the fire — no larger than a coal from his own stove — and then he saw the little villager. She was combing snarls from her hair and holding a broken mirror with the other hand. Jacques pulled his head back, then bent again to make sure. A real villager! She was perhaps a little larger than he would have imagined — she rose and stood at the fire to braid her hair, and her head almost reached the ceiling — but she was real, alive, and living in the world he'd recreated.

Jacques' mind overflowed with things the little burgess would need, the thousand inadequacies of his creation which must now be set right. There was no

water. He could not imagine how to give the house running water without greatly disarranging its occupant, but he would fill the village well. She would need cooking pots, and food stores, and heaven knows what else. And all this, he felt keenly, must be provided without too harshly awakening her to the realities of the larger world. Gradually, quietly, he thought, he must make the village a perfect home. And then, perhaps, more of these miracles would arise. His village and life would be richly peopled. Jacques smiled, backed away unseen, and set to work.

First, he roused Blanche-Neige from the kitchen and set about cutting appropriately sized loaves and wheels from the cheese in the pantry. He filled a cufflink box with cake flour and tied up sachets of pepper and salt no greater than his fingernail. These he placed on the counter of the grocery, hoping they would be more obvious there than on the shelves full of plaster products and placeholders. He ranged five Brussels sprouts in the box outside the shop with a card on which he scratched “GRATUIT.” He cleaned the well and filled it with cold water.

All this he did with the greatest stealth, checking the door of the tailor’s shop and its front windows to make sure he was unobserved. He would have to hang a curtain around the table, he thought, perhaps the color of the sky.

That afternoon, he watched from his shop with a toy telescope until the girl opened the door. She stepped out of the shop softly, as carefully as a bird might step into an open space, ready to fly. He held his breath. She stood by the door for a long moment before walking into the street and looking around. The light was dim between the buildings — another thing to fix — but she would be able to see clearly the store signs he had painted over the months with his magnifying glass and memory. The Brussels sprouts must have caught her eye, for she started toward them, then stopped at the well, with a full bucket of water set on its rim. She drank deeply, then looked around again. “Hello?” she called. “Madame? Monsieur?” Jacques did not answer, but watched her explore the village, discovering almost all his gifts and some other useful items.

Jacques heard a rapping far off — the girl heard it too, from the sudden lift of her head — and found several boys knocking at the front door, eager to buy

jacks and undeterred by the closed shop. Reluctantly, Jacques turned away from the village.

Over the next few days, he sent away for some doll's house items, ready-made: a larger mirror for the wall and a set of pots, the enameled sort, not made from lead. When they arrived, he wrapped them in tissue paper, tied them with thread, and left them by the girl's door. He chuckled over her surprise and delight as if he were Father Christmas, peering through the cheesecloth windows in his blue curtain. She still called out when she found some new gift or improvement, but she no longer seemed to expect an answer, and usually said only, "Thank you."

Jacques was pleased to observe that her step was gaining confidence, to see her walking about town just as his mother had done, head high, with a shopping basket (woven by Jacques) on her arm. She looked more like his sister, though, her hair light brown and arranged in a modern style.

But no matter how homelike Jacques made the houses, streets and shops, no matter how many twigs of firewood he laid by or how many mattresses he stuffed, no more villagers appeared.

One night, Jacques removed the roof of the grocery as usual. He was lowering a hand-painted tin full of fine-grained tea into place when the girl leapt from under the counter and grabbed his wrist with all her strength. He gave a start, of course, but he could not shake her off for fear of breaking her bones.

"Good evening! My name is Fleur Perrot, and I believe you have been my host these months, Monsieur..."

"Jaillet," he stammered. "Jacques Jaillet."

"Happy to make your acquaintance, M. Jaillet." She gave his hand a shake and let go. "I'm very grateful to you for your many kindnesses, especially since I arrived unannounced and uninvited—"

"No no, very glad, very glad you came—"

"—but I am curious about where I am and how it came to be."

Jacques' face fell into creases of unhappiness. Must she drain the magic away? She who was so clearly magic herself? "It's a model," he mumbled at last. "Of my village as it was, for the most part."



“As it was?”

“Before the war.”

“Oh.” Fleur folded her hands. “May I ask what you do, M. Jaillet? A carpenter, perhaps?”

“A toymaker. I sell toys.” He thought Fleur’s face brightened, though it was hard to be sure.

“Then I’m sure I can be of help to you. I’d like to work for my keep.”

“Not necessary! Not at all necessary. I would be happy if you simply stayed in the village. You eat no more than a mouse.”

“I doubt you spend so much time preparing the mice’s portions, Monsieur.” She gave Jacques a penetrating look. “Besides, I am staying in the tailor’s shop. Shouldn’t I be a tailor?”

So Jacques began bringing fabric and fashioning scissors and needles so that Fleur could clothe herself and her ‘clients,’ the dolls from the shop, whose measurements Jacques brought to her on minute pieces of paper.

In time, Fleur coaxed Jacques to come and talk with her in the evenings, to read to her even. He had a few books of his own from childhood, simple retellings of fairy tales and myths. When she asked him to read from the paper or to bring magazines, he protested that his reading was poor, but really he hated to pollute the model village with anything from the outside. Reluctantly, he would read a few mild paragraphs of the day’s news. Fleur always wanted to see the latest fashions, no matter what Jacques said against them.

He fretted, too, when the little seamstress wanted to know all his own stories: not just the tales of the old, unimproved village in which he delighted, but his wartime experiences. “Did you see the Tour Eiffel? Were there many people in Paris?” She did not ask about the flight from the village, or about the marker in the model cemetery that could not possibly have been there before the war, the one that read “Alphonse et Marie Jaillet, 1918.” But she did ask if he had sisters or brothers.

“A sister,” he admitted, and before she could ask one question more he barked, “I don’t know where she is now! England? Canada? I haven’t seen her since Paris.”

The girl, seated in the village square, looked down at her sewing. Jacques did not know how to apologize, so he did not.

Fleur helped Jacques arrange the merchandise in the little shop windows just so, and decorate for holidays. She marveled over the tiny furniture he made, and the conveniences he contrived. As he watched the candles flare out from the finger-thin church windows on Christmas Eve, Jacques was more happy than he’d been since before the first murmurs of war.

~

“Can I go out and see the festival this time, Jacques, please?” Fleur asked that spring.

“It’s not safe.”

“Fine, then I won’t go out. I can stand in the shop window. Who will notice me among the dolls?”

“You have your own festival here!” Jacques said, blowing on the banners hung around the little village square.

“By myself? At least take me to mass this Sunday. Please, Jacques, my mother took me to church my entire childhood. I’ll be perfectly safe.”

“You have your own church there!” said Jacques. He looked pained, as he always did when she spoke of her life before.

“It’s not real, not consecrated. It’s a toy church!”

Jacques turned away. At least this time he hadn’t suggested making a little wooden priest to hear her confession. “Here,” he said, putting a lace handkerchief down on the cobbles. “I bought you this. Perhaps it would make a nice apron?” He moved away, and soon she smelled his pipe, off in the kitchen where she couldn’t disturb him. She picked up the frilly fabric and twisted it back and forth. Finally she carried it into the house and started cutting out curtains of her own.

~

Jacques did not think much about Fleur's past, and less still about her future. It was enough to know that she, like him, was an orphan. She had been brought to him by grief and loss, so no loss could take her away.

Under his care, the village had grown in size and fullness. It stretched to the edges of the table — he now ate off his knee — and included every building he remembered, even a whittled semblance of a beloved tree. It was a perfected world: a world that did not stretch as far as Paris, contained no nightclubs, no English officers with charmingly halting French. He had never thought of trapping Fleur in this Eden, because he never thought of her wanting to leave.

~

Lace curtains would keep Jacques out, but other curtains kept Fleur in. The dusty blue fabric hung around the village's table was the boundary of her world. Jacques never left a chair close to the edge now, as he'd done that first night. On a piece of paper on the wall, Fleur marked the days. She'd asked for a pocket calendar, but Jacques had given her the wrong year.

The pipe tobacco smell had faded, and Jacques called the cat in before going to bed. She could hear Blanche-Neige prowling and pouncing — on real mice or imagined ones, she did not know — behind the kitchen door. She crept out of her house and took the main street right to the edge of town center, the end of the world nearest the window.

She heard a motor car passing in the real street outside, and its lamps blanched the blue sky curtain ahead. There was a hint of music, occasional laughter. Footsteps. They tantalized her far more than the carol of children's voices in the toy shop by day. Those out there in the night were adults, had to be. People walking from place to place as they liked. When she was newly come to this sham

village, she had thought she was like them. Streets her size, a world of her own that she needn't fear. But perhaps anything you needn't fear is not really a world.

She fell asleep on the stones of the village street, a few centimetres from the drop, and didn't wake up until Blanche-Neige started scratching in the morning.

"Jacques," she said that evening, when he presented her with a tiny cut of chicken on a saucer and two green beans. "I have decided to leave the village."

Jacques took a sip of wine and shook his head.

"Aren't you listening? I want to leave."

"You are part of the village now," he said, muffling his words with bread. "How can you leave?"

"Quite easily, if you'll help me."

"Isn't safe."

"Come now, Jacques. You like your neighbors, I can tell when you speak of them. Do you really think they'll do me harm?"

"You know nothing of the world, Fleur."

Fleur lost patience and threw her saucer of food back at him. The gravy ran down his vest and the china broke on the far-away floor. "I know nothing of the world because I have not been allowed to learn! I have been kept like a bird in a cage all my life, but I will not be kept any longer! I am a person, neither a doll nor a fairy!"

Jacques brushed the food from his clothes and looked sadly at her.

"I am grateful for all you've done," Fleur said, but Jacques stood and walked away. "If I could trade places with you, I would!" she yelled. "But I can't!"

Very late that night, Fleur put her scissors in her pocket and threaded her largest needle — a full-sized one — with white silk thread still on the spool. She rolled the spool to the edge of the table where the blue cloth hung, moving restlessly in the air. The cloth stopped a bare 5 centimetres past the tabletop, but she planned to use it regardless. She stabbed the curtain with her needle several times before she managed to bring it within reach. She passed her thread once through the heavy blue fabric, then made a harness for herself with several huge

stitches through her skirts and loops around her body. She held the spool firmly in her arms, said an Our Father and jumped.

She fell her own length before the thread caught her and tugged at her spool. She let it out slowly, like a spider descending, and came to rest on the grimy wood floor.

Jacques had replaced the pane she had pried out of the window that long-ago night, and the back door and shop door were flush to the ground, but Fleur had another plan. A dangerous, perhaps mad plan, but she reminded herself that the world was full of danger, for her more than most, and she was going to live in it. As light started to appear in the windows overhead, Fleur got down on her belly and looked under the kitchen door. Blanche-Neige lay sleeping on the kitchen rug. As quietly as she could, Fleur kicked off her shoes and crawled under the door. The cat's mouth was open and its breath hissed past ivory fangs that looked longer than Fleur's hands.

Fleur stood on tiptoe and crept toward the animal. Cautiously she looped thread around the creature. The great plume tail twitched, then was still. Now Fleur's heart sank from its position under her chin. She needed to get at the cat's belly or this wouldn't work. Gingerly she stepped closer to the rank mouth and murmured, as low as she could pitch her voice, "Good cat, pretty cat." She scratched the silky hollow below its ear, down the line of the jaw to its chin. With a bone-shaking purr, Blanche-Neige turned on her back, and Fleur hurried to make all ready.

Only a moment after she was done, Fleur heard Jacques' boots scrape against the floor upstairs, and the cat leapt to attention. This morning, though, instead of hurrying to the door, she gave a confused mew and shook her head, then her tail. She shook herself all over, like a wet dog, but Fleur hung on, and when Jacques opened the kitchen door, Blanche-Neige slowly stalked toward it.

"What is wrong, Blanche-Neige, my little princess?" said Jacques, and the cat cried piteously. Jacques only opened the outer door — yes, the outer door — and waited beside it. "Don't you want a belly-rub this morning?"

The cat kicked her back legs one after another, and slunk with her belly so low that Fleur, slung underneath, nearly hit her head on the floor. The girl freed one hand and petted the soft fur on the beast's belly, breathing words of comfort and encouragement. Blanche-Neige stood still for a moment, then purred and padded forward, past the bemused toymaker, over the threshold and out. Like Odysseus in the story Jacques had read her, Fleur had passed under the giant's nose. She heard the door close.

She was still far from safe, but as she watched the bright grass below, Fleur felt free already. Suddenly, her monstrous steed stopped and sat on its haunches to examine itself. The big green eyes stared at Fleur in her network of threads and the purring stopped. The whiskers flared and the pupils went wide. Fleur tugged herself free and ran.

She flung herself into the street, yelling for help, half afraid and half excited, her feet bare on the pavement. She could still be caught by the cat, could still be recaptured and kept a secret by Jaillet, but all her plans had worked and she was out in the world.

A man walked by on the other side of the street and Fleur shouted, "Help! Monsieur!" but he did not seem to hear. Up ahead she saw a door open and a woman dressed in plum step out. "Of course, Father, I can have it mended long before services," she said as Fleur ran at her, the cat just behind.

Fleur leapt for the cloth folded over her arm, a torn cassock, and climbed up it as the woman exclaimed. At the top, she paused to breathe. The priest crossed himself, and Mme. Tailler, a quick-witted lady, snatched up her umbrella and waved it at Blanche-Neige. "Get away, you wicked thing!"

The priest leaned in. "What can it be?" he said.

Fleur straightened. "Monsieur le Curé, my name is Fleur Perrot, and I am a doll's dressmaker. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

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Jacques had barely heard the commotion in the street, and was arranging a morsel of brioche and a doll's cup of coffee when the priest and Mme. Tailler surged through his back door, with a tail of angry and curious spectators behind her. Jacques cried, "What are you doing?" and then, as he recognized the odd figurehead on Mme. Tailler's broad-brimmed hat, "Fleur!" He could say nothing more.

"*Monsieur Jaillet*," Mme. Tailler said with accusing umbrella raised. "This girl has told me she was detained here against her will! What do you have to say on your behalf?"

Jacques's callused fingers tore at his morning brioche, but he said nothing. The assembled villagers looked from him to Fleur and began to mutter.

"He's been a little bizarre since the war," a man said.

"It's abduction, isn't it? It's illegal," a crone offered.

One of the larger men, a mason, stepped forward. "Come with me, Jaillet. Don't make a fuss."

Jacques began to back away, but Fleur called out, her little voice heard clearly from the height of Mme. Tailler's head. "Stop, everyone! M. Jaillet kept me here, it's true, but I do not believe his intentions were bad."

A chorus of doubt arose. Fleur looked at the cringing toymaker and called, "Jacques, show it to them."

Jacques shook his head, but Fleur said, "They need to see to understand."

Sadly, Jacques took one corner of his blue curtain and drew it back. The villagers, the curious children and Mme. Tailler leaned forward to see — Fleur nearly lost her balance.

"You see," Fleur said. "He was trying to make everything how it was, and he believed I could be part of that."

"Why, it's my old house!" Mme. Tailler said. M. Leclerc pointed at his own boyhood home and covered his eyes. The priest bent to examine the painted paper windows of the little church. The children ducked under the curtain on the other sides and stood on tiptoe, wise enough not to touch with so many adults watching.

"It's beautiful," said the priest.

“It’s his dream,” said Fleur.

The mason put his arms around Jacques and began to cry.

Jacques patted the big man’s shoulder. “I know,” he whispered. “We will never see that village again.”

So Jacques was allowed to stay in his toy shop, and with his neighbors’ encouragement, he added another sign below “Jaillet Jouets”: “Come see the miniature village.”

As for Fleur, she set up shop with Mme. Tailler, who needed a junior partner. Just as her mother had always feared, newspapers heard of her, and circuses, but Fleur accepted none of these early offers.

She hired Jacques to make her some tools and furniture — just her size now, not a hair too small. She did the fine work to spare Mme. Tailler’s eyes, and sewed christening bonnets, veils, and embroidered hankies.

And when one day a man offered to make her a working sewing machine just her size and pay her a yearly fee, she agreed to have her picture in the advertisements. She was shown at her little machine with a full-sized machine for scale. “Look at that,” she said to the other village spinsters, gathered around in the showroom of Tailler & Perrot. “*Like it was sewn by fairies,*” she read off the clipping. “Such nonsense.”

“I tried to convince her to let me frame it,” Mme. Tailler said, “but Mlle. Perrot is a stubborn woman.”

“I can look in the mirror if I want to see myself,” Fleur said, “and without a ridiculous caption under my image!”

“The man from the sewing machine company asked Mlle. Perrot if she would make appearances in Paris. Told her she was wasting her potential up here,” Mme. Tailler said.

“I told him,” Fleur said, “that in towns as in tailoring, each person has her size.”