

TWO BROTHERS

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

Once upon a time in the late 1950s, in a small French village, two brothers lived in a dilapidated one-bedroom old-style stone house. The two men worked in a factory to which they commuted by bike, one wearing a beret the other a cap. Though different in features, they were both simple-minded, leading uncomplicated lives.

Coming close to retirement age, they decided to have their house renovated not so much for themselves as for their niece, their chosen inheritor. Deep down they knew they lived in a hovel, fit for them, they thought, but quite unsuitable for a young lady. Their savings were kept in a suitcase under the bed.

They talked to the town carpenter and together showed him their house, walking side by side with a stoop, explaining in woolly terms what they wanted done, evidently not sure themselves of what *had* to be done. Mr Martin looked at their confused faces, at the derelict place, and reflected a moment. He then quickly summarised what it would entail: new kitchen and bathroom, parquet floor, etc, and provided a rough estimate. The brothers opened the suitcase. In it decades of savings in piles and piles of banknotes. Mr Martin paused a while. The brothers humbly waited and hoped. Their request was accepted. Soon after the renovations began.

As the work progressed, Mr Martin sat down with the two men to discuss a topic he felt was quite delicate. He began with the bedroom where both brothers shared the same bed. He suggested two single beds instead with new mattresses, pillows and sheets. Then there was the bathroom: a tale of its own, a sponge for paper. It lay on the floor, worn, with scattered threads of hairs entangled in its earth-tinted porous sinuosities, telling a story of ignorance, unlearned basic hygiene and deprivation of small comforts.

The brothers listened with attention to Mr Martin, lapping up each word, overwhelmed by the task ahead of them, before they timidly asked him to join them in their shopping expedition. He, they believed, knew what was required in a home.

Their house had now green shutters and a matching green door with a brass bell. On the window sills, pots of red geraniums, the carpenter's touch, graced the stony facade left unpainted to keep that rustic look of yesteryear. On the front steps, stood two gnomes called Eddie and Robert, a present from their niece.

The bell rang first for the eldest, Eddie. Robert's turn came some five years later. In the village where they were born and lived all their life, the brothers were driven, each in turn, to the cemetery and put to rest in a shared grave. Their niece placed the two gnomes on the tomb and a planter box with twin thuja trees.

