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Room 101

by Mary Brannigan

She was there most days except Sunday. No one knew when she first appeared in the townland of Cappagh. It seemed as though Mrs Hurson had always been among us. There was no sign of a Mr Hurson. If he'd ever existed he was long gone by the time the old lady came on the scene. The dilapidated hut was a mile from number one hundred Main Street, the last house in the village. Here she dispensed wisdom on matters as diverse as the outcome of crops and the likelihood of having a child. Reading the tea leaves was her chosen way of obtaining answers to the various problems brought by the many souls who sought her out in room 101. Her working day ended at six in the evening when she padlocked the hut and made her way home to the old caravan in the woods. This was her retreat from the world and its problems and no one was admitted to this sanctuary. It seemed she had no wish to socialise beyond the confines of room 101.

Mrs Hurson looked unaffected by the passage of time, her unlined face and white hair piled high as when she'd first come among us. The black dress down to her ankles covered by a white pinafore paid no heed to the fashions of the day. Slim and erect, she passed by us like a wraith from another time. My granny sometimes went to see Mrs Hurson, taking me along for the walk. But I was never privy to their meetings, being told to play outside while they talked. This was frowned upon by my grandfather who said it was only given to god to know the future. In this he was at one with the parish priest who preached against the pagan practice of clairvoyance. The populace took his rants with a pinch of salt, continuing their visits to the old woman, who added their donations to her meagre pension.

Word sometimes leaked out about the outcome of predictions. It seemed Joan O'Neill had called on her after she gave birth to her second stillborn baby. Mrs Hurson merely said that the number five was auspicious for her. Joan made her disappointed way home and in due course endured two more still births.

Then a year later on the fifth of May she became the mother of a healthy baby boy. So our days passed punctuated by Sunday mass, visits to Mrs Hurson and nightly gatherings of neighbours in my granny's house, where gossip was exchanged. Old Bob Corr was among those coming to partake of tea and granny's home made cake. He was something of a hermit and said to be 'Not quite right'. So it was a surprise when word got out he'd been to see Mrs Hurson. Some said he'd been unwell lately and was after the cure. What she'd told him remained between them, but two weeks later after making his confession to Father Devlin he dropped dead on the church doorstep.

Whatever the content of this confession, it and the sudden death spurred the priest to action. At Sunday mass the next week he issued an edict banning Mrs Hurson's clients from attending church. The congregation was torn between their faith and loyalty to the old lady. Fear of the church won out and the woman's visitors dwindled, so she often sat alone in the hut for hours. This continued for some months till one day she turned up on granny's doorstep. When the tea was made we children were sent out to play, leaving the two women alone till two hours later Mrs Hurson made her way back to the caravan.

Granny visited her there the next day, being the first person allowed inside this haven. When we pleaded for details of the meeting granny said she needed help with tidying up. After this episode the few brave souls who still sought out Mrs Hurson found a notice on room 101 saying there would be no more reading of the leaves. A month later my granny found the old woman dead in her caravan, with a crucifix above her bed and a bible in her hand. She'd had no need of Father Devlin.