## **The Middle Seat**

The messages would always be short and to the point. The phone would ring, she would answer in her usual way “Hello, Antrim Road Surgery, Helen speaking.” and then she would hear three words.

On this occasion the three words were “Consul. Blue. Seven.”

Later that evening she collected the stolen Ford from the seventh space to the right of the entrance at the Windsor Hotel car park and drove to a vacant house in Ballymagarry. She was always first choice for this type of job, less chance of being stopped by the peelers with a woman driver so they reckoned, (Not that this theory stood up to scrutiny considering there were usually four men in the car.)

Tommy was the first out of the house. He got into the passenger seat next to her and said, “Now listen Hel, this is a tough one for you, just remember it’s been sanctioned and is justified.

“What do you mean? Who is it?”

“You’ll see soon enough.”

Three men left the house, all of whom Helen knew. It was hard to work out who was guarding who at first. Then she realised, Chrissy was in the middle. The prisoner is always in the middle.

“Oh Christ, no! Not Wee Chrissy! His ma and my ma are close friends. He was in my class at school.”

“Pull yourself together Helen, don’t let him see you upset, there’s nothing we can do, it’s been decided, he’s been talking to the wrong people.”

Wee Chrissy made no attempt to run, he knew he wouldn’t get far, and he had nowhere to go anyway. The back door opened, and the three men slid along the bench seat in the back of the car.

Helen looked into the rearview mirror and Wee Chrissy’s eyes locked with hers. She noticed a small bruise on his left cheekbone.

“Alright Hel,” he said, “How’s your ma?”

“She’s grand, thank you Chrissy, How’s yours? How’ve you been for yourself?”

“Oh, not too bad, you know. Just got myself in a wee bit of bother here, but it’ll all work out. No trouble.”

“Aye, I'm sure you’re right Chrissy, it’ll be no problem.”

Chrissy gulped. “You still working down the doctor’s surgery there are you?”

“I am aye, for my sins.” She gave a nervous laugh and detected the slightest hint of a smile at the side of his mouth.

“Your ma must be very proud of you Helen, helping people like that.” said Chris, with a hint of irony.

He looked nervous. Of course, he’d still have to have a court martial yet, but everyone knew that an IRA court martial was usually a done deal. The hole had probably already been dug. The middle seat in the back was a one-way ticket.

The drive was a painful one, the four men remained silent for most of it. Helen glanced back at Chrissy in the rear-view mirror and saw him staring intensely back at her. She could feel his stare even when she wasn’t looking directly at him. His eyes drilled into her head like an ice pick. He looked like he wanted to tell her something but couldn't find the words.

She wondered how his life had taken this turn, what had convinced him to speak to the security services? How had both their lives come to this? She had known Chris as long as she could remember. They’d lived in the same street as children.

Chrissy had always stood up for Helen despite being quite small for his age. When Helen had been pestered on her way home by some older lads, Chrissy had taken a beating for trying to intervene, she would always be grateful for him trying. He was a brave lad.

It was inevitable that they would both join the Provos, she had never discussed it with Chris, but she was aware of him joining sometime after her, it was always the likely outcome growing up Catholic in that area.

Since childhood they had grown apart but always remained on friendly terms when they saw each other.

After a while Helen drove the Ford Consul into a country lane and stopped outside a small farmhouse. She looked at Chris; He looked distressed but also somehow resigned to his fate.

“Can I ask one thing before I get out?” he said.

Tommy nodded.

“Please tell my Ma where I am.” He looked directly into the mirror at Helen as he asked.

“I will Chrissy, sure I will.” replied Helen.

With that, Chrissy smiled and nodded, he understood that Helen couldn’t fulfil her promise, but it was comforting to think that she might. The three men in the back got out of the car and entered the farm.

“Let’s go.” said Tommy.

Helen started the engine, turned around in the yard and set off down the lane. The tears in her eyes made it difficult to drive. She pulled over and sobbed.

Tommy placed a hand on her shoulder, “It had to be done Hel. Too much at stake. Don’t blame yourself, you only drove the car.”

Helen saw Wee Chrissy’s mother around town occasionally over the next few weeks. She always managed to duck out of the way to avoid any awkward questions. The guilt of her involvement in Wee Chrissy’s fate was becoming intolerable. Helen had driven similar missions since that time, and on each journey she had felt the stare of Chrissy’s eyes burning into her skull.

One Saturday morning Helen was visiting her own mother when the subject of Wee Chrissy was raised.

“You heard anything from him at all? Maureen is worried sick.”

“No.” said Helen. Whilst inside her head a voice was screaming “I only drove the car!”

“No, not seen him at all.”