

A little bit of babysitting

by Peter Wood

Roy Williams was his real name. It had been for the last 15 years. Since retiring from the Firm he'd lived innocuously in an apartment near the Old City walls of Dubrovnik doing the occasional quick job for them. You never entirely retired from the Firm. Not that it mattered too much. Roy happily took the odd small job: it added a few extra Kuna to his Channel Islands based bank account and allowed him to maintain his skillset, his edge.

Basing the account in Jersey hadn't been the Firm's ideas — less out of tax reasons and more for privacy, pure and simple. Dubrovnik wasn't too expensive so if you were careful the small errands for the Firm gave him a relatively comfortable semi-retirement in a city he loved — Dubrovnik: even after the 'cold war' this was still one of the significant bridges between East and West.

The thrill of the chase also helped.

After parking near the constantly busy airport taxi rank, Roy picked up his black lacquered walking cane, slid from the driver's seat of his faded Skoda and began his slow slightly stooped journey to the airport's arrival area.

Sliding doors hissed a greeting. He glanced at the overhead signs, found the one that pointed left to 'arrivals'. He stalked his way towards the small puddle of people waiting for their guests.

The group was hardly a mixed bunch. Most were chauffeurs from nearby hotels collecting newly arrived guests. As always, there were a few locals and ex - pats eager to greet family, friends and loved ones. They were easy to spot, usually in couples with excitable kids in tow.

The airport was still relatively quiet. Roy's cane click-clacked on the polished scuffed floor.

One or two of the chauffeurs glanced his way as he approached but returned their gaze to the mouth of the corridor that would soon belch out partly decompressed travellers.

Ray was hardly memorable: just an old duffer who'd taken care of his body, likely meeting another geriatric colleague or family member. A perfect Wether's Original grandfather, nothing more.

Roy slipped into the crowd of greeters. They part without fuss and he nods a thank you, rests both his palms on the stick with a pantomime sigh.

His left inside jacket pocket contains the job details. He doesn't need to consult them.

Last night a fax had spewed from the fax in the apartment. Two pages. The first contains two slightly fuzzy passport photos, the second, the flight details - EZ36542, and an arrival time of 11.45. Nothing more. Just how the firm liked it, how Roy had got used to working. Names and extraneous details just fogged the issue. Not knowing allowed for future deniability if anything untoward happened. Not that Roy expected that. Besides there were always channels to find out information.

The photos were of a couple - one male one female. Nowadays you can't say couple and expect that as *de rigeur*.

After receiving the fax, Roy had done a brief Internet search.

Him: The male worked in IT for a London based university. No outstanding achievements or misdemeanours just a grafter with tech skills and the paperwork to prove it. Some minor commendations but mostly a clean slate - if anything an underachiever. The Uni probably had its perks or why else graft there when other places paid more for similar work. A work to live not live to work type.

Her: She was a more interesting prospect. A career teacher but active outside the classroom with several charity organisations and a local AA group every few weeks. Definitely more organised and driven of the two.

Once details had been obtained and memorised Roy deleted the cache on the computer and closed it down. Always best not to leave too many traces or size nines in the ether.

Before setting his alarm for 8.30 and arranging his clothes, Roy stepped out onto the balcony, checked the cat saucer, poured the

silty dirty water over the side, returned to the bathroom re-filled it whispering ' puss puss.'

Roy didn't actually have a cat. It was hardly necessary when Dubrovnik seemed to spawn its fair share of street cats and strays. Most of them, during tourist season congregated round the restaurants of the Old City and the waterfront. They no doubt exterminated vermin during their nighttime prowls keeping restaurants pest free. In return chefs and staff kept them fed and loved up with the odd bit of pampering. Off season the cats were dependant on feline-friendly homeowners. Famine and feast. The way of everything really.

Roy then got ready for bed. Always an early night before a job.

"Early start?" Roy's partner J called from the kitchenette.

Roy glanced up in near surprise; he'd forgotten J was there, "Just an arrival."

"Anyone I know?"

"No, just a newbie on the circuit."

Roy leans on the partition to the kitchen, watches J as he pours water into the kettle, "None for me."

J looks up smiling wryly, "Didn't think so." He notices Roy rubbing his stomach, gives him a look of concern, "You alright?"

"Nothing a sleep won't settle."

"I'll be up soon."

"Take your time." Roy replies, pushing his weight off the partition, retreating to the semi-darkness of the corridor. He knew he should probably have asked J about his day, how were his pals at the Club were, but the conversation would likely wind on longer than he really had patience for right now. It could wait til tomorrow.

The bedroom was the largest room in the apartment, but miniscule by US standards. Roy lay down and burrowed beneath the Egyptian cotton sheets. His mind began evaluating the job. Two highly innocuous individuals with barely a black mark between them, yet something had piqued the Firm's interest...

Was this a test, a dry run for something bigger? Hardly put it past the Firm but did they really ever waste time and money on things

like that? Hardly. Never. Not with an experienced operative at any rate. So? What was so special about these two? Or one of them.

Somewhere between this thought percolating and the alarm bleeping Roy had intended to get up, re-boot the computer, check further channels.

That hadn't happened.

Taking his morning coffee at The Troubadour Roy attempted to access Wi-Fi from his phone. No joy.

"Internet down, Mr Roy." The waiter shrugged in broken English.

Roy nodded, slurps down a slug of thick dark, mostly milk-less coffee and sighs.

Although Roy was more than proficient in languages he made it a rule to speak only English when out and about. Let others think he was just some retired ex-pat from someplace else: Far easier. It still amazed him how people let their guard down when they thought they weren't being understood. He knew some of the waitresses in nearby restaurants had far seamier lives than they'd usually let on because of this. Sometimes it was difficult not to smirk when they were getting graphic about their love lives.

Now, partially cloaked by chauffeurs and locals awaiting the arrival of their human cargo, the tail-end of that question still nagged. He propped his hands on the walking cane with another sigh. From where he stood he scanned the chauffeurs name cards, hoping one might bare the name of his unknowing charges but the angle was too sharp to properly see and now he was too boxed in to really check.

Suddenly, from behind the screens Roy heard the steady approach of footsteps and grumbling suitcases rolling and grating across the shiny flagstone floor. Instinctively Roy's body straightens, spine instantly losing the old-man curve, senses piqued and ready.

He watches people appear from behind the screen like some gameshow conveyor belt.

Mentally, he discards the locals from the stream of tourists. The residents and locals simply marched through, no sideways gazing, just a direct methodical walk to the exit, buses and carpark. Roy

focuses his glance on the arrivals that gaze left and right, scanning for namecards, those that hesitated, even unconsciously, in their gait.

Like turning up for a blind date, Roy had a momentary tinge of fear of a no-show as newly despatched passengers filed from behind the arrivals screen.

So far, his prey had not arrived. Several looked similar but not who he had been charged with 'babysitting'.

Red jackets, blue jeans, Samsonite suitcases, khaki-coloured coats and jackets, a whole parade of consumer goods passes across Roy's gaze. Nothing.

Then.

The couple. Definitely, the couple.

The man trails a green-grey non-descript looking suitcase in one hand and in the other he's holding both passports before stuffing them into an inside pocket of his jacket. The woman walks beside him wheeling a second suitcase. She had evidently asked him something because he's nodding, face turned towards her — and away from Roy — he says something which Roy cannot lip-read but the woman smiles.

Both man and woman are now smiling, relaxed and holiday-ready.

At the end of the chauffeur's line a man in pristine expensive-looking black suit and flip-up aviator style shades steps forward and takes the cases.

Instinctively Roy turns, begins his amble out of the diminishing line of greeters. As he turns he sees the woman beam happily at her partner.

The chauffeur and his charges sidle towards the exit. As they approach, Roy's male charge makes a smoking gesture to the chauffeur with his hand. The chauffeur shrugs an ok and points to their car: A beefy black Merc.

The impromptu cigarette break gives Roy time to quick-cane walk to his car. He unlocks it, places the cane in the passenger seat, buckles his seatbelt and places the key into the ignition.

He watches the couple Hoover down their cigarettes then scoot into the back of the Merc.

Roy nudges the gearstick into first, pulls out of the parking bay just as the Merc does the same. Another car slides between them. Roy allows it. Less easy for him to be spotted en route. Not that he anticipated anyone to be really that watchful.

Once out of Dubrovnik airport carpark, Roy trailed the black Merc down steep winding curves overlooking the translucent perfectly blue sea of the Adriatic — a picture that always found its way into some tourist brochure or other. Coming to a place like this, how could you not fail to lower your guard even just a little?

The winding curves and squirly bends slowly decreased as the roads got closer to sea-level, becoming the more built-up outskirts of Dubrovnik's old town. Neither the Mer nor Roy's Skoda were in a hurry. No doubt, for the chauffeur this was just an easy, nicely paying door-to-door job. No stress, no hassles and likely a nice tip at the end of it.

The Merc made its entry onto the main road that led towards Dubrovnik's old city and gradually slowed to a stop outside the Hotel Argentina.

The chauffeur hops out and opening the Merc's trunk. As he hefts out the suitcases, placing them on the tarmac, Roy's charges exit the Merc.

One of the hotel porters quickly rescues the suitcases and continues their journey inside the hotel. A second porter lingers nearby, nods to the chauffeur as the man profusely thanks him and hands over a tip — no doubt a little too large, which is oftentimes the case when someone is less than an hour in a new country.

Roy watches his charges amble into the lobby from the car.

Unassuming - Yes.

Non-descript — mostly.

So, why had the Firm asked him to keep tabs on them?

Roy pulled out his mobile, typed in the text message 'Package arrived. Further instructions?' He watched the hotel entrance for

five minutes, six minutes. No further instructions no response from the Firm.

After the seventh minute, three stretch white Mercs decked out in wedding regalia pulled up outside the hotel. Several guests, already a little drunk poured out of them.

Roy played 'spot the bride' with himself but none of them seemed to fit the bill. The porters now scuttled out to meet, greet and escort guests and baggage across the threshold and into the hotel's comfort.

Roy clocked his watch. Nine minutes since his charges had entered the hotel. With a wedding party arrival he could easily sneak in and watch them unnoticed from a ring-side seat though that wasn't part of the instructions. He looks at his mobile.

Still nothing from the Firm.

At the tenth minute Roy replaces his mobile in the glove compartment, places the Skoda into first and drives back to J.

