

The Big (E)Sleep

Dirk Web sat in his dingy office, looking out the grit-crusted window at the city and wondering how his life had turned out this way. The hum from the ceiling lights made him wince. It was like two bad tap dancers doing a number in his brain, somewhere just behind his eyes. He'd thought about getting a desk lamp once, but that kind of luxury wasn't exactly in the budget.

Budget, yeah. His desk predated the McKinley administration. It looked like it had been dragged behind a garbage truck and then dropped into place from about 60 feet up. And he couldn't remember if the coffee cup leaving ring #8,006 was from last night or last week.

**Dirk Web is on the case with a new twist,
dodging slugs, and trading in his roscoe for a PDA.
(with apologies to Raymond Chandler)**

By John Coné

Over in the corner was a battered file cabinet, filled with other people's problems, most of which he couldn't solve. Somewhere in the crumpled mess of papers on top were the old invoices, the threatening letters, the remnants of the broken dreams of strangers—and a pot of dirt that once was a plant, from a client he couldn't remember.

A couple of cheap chairs resided just on the other side of his desk. The chairs were different colors, but both were worn smooth by the backsides of a thousand desperate and confused people who would never have been sitting in those chairs if there was anywhere else they could have gone for help.

Looking back at him from the pitted gray walls were a couple of cheap prints left behind by the previous occupant and a poster from a long-forgotten campaign by some would-be leader who came and went without delivering on his promises. Surveying the dismal scene, Dirk chuckled to

he yelled through the door to his secretary, Doris: "Hey sweetheart, get me the Parker file, will ya?"

He called her sweetheart because he had a genuine lurch for her. But since he ran the company's sexual harassment seminars, he had everyone convinced he was just being ironic. It was one of the few perks of the job.

But when he turned around, it wasn't Doris standing in the doorway; it was Shirley Fogatta, someone he knew too well and didn't want to know any better. They had a past, he and Shirley, and neither one of them was proud of it. Some off-sites just should never happen. And what some people call teambuilding, others call purgatory.

"Got a minute?" Shirley asked.

She didn't look any happier to be there than Dirk was to see her. Shirley was a user, trading on the dreams of young kids who thought they were gonna be stars and wound up instead walking the streets or

of bad hooch. This couldn't be. They ran sales negotiations every month, right after time management and just before "Speaking for Success." It just didn't make sense.

The world was spinning out of control. Sure, life was crazy, but some things just don't change. The sun came up every morning, the freeways were always crowded, the performance review form got revised every year, the training schedule was always the same, and sales negotiations was always on it.

He had to find that course.

"Doris!" he shouted, "Cancel my weekly meeting on inventing new training metrics to measure ROI. I'm on a case."

"You're not trying to come up with the eighth habit again, are you?" Doris asked, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

"No, I've got to find the sales negotiations program."

The look that Doris gave him as he swept past her desk was one he'd seen be-

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himself: The way things were going nowadays, he should probably be glad just to have an office.

How did he wind up here? Doing this? What had happened to his dreams? Those had been a long time ago, he shook his head sadly.

He had once considered being a cop. He didn't mind the rough stuff. To tell the truth, he kind of enjoyed it. But there were too many rules—too many rights and wrongs you had to watch out for, and all that just got in the way. A couple of times, he thought about being a salesman, maybe selling shoes or something. But the truth was, he just didn't like most people.

So, he wound up here, dividing his time between the wimps and the losers who couldn't handle their own problems and the slime bags and thugs who took advantage of the wimps and losers to line their own pockets.

Yeah, Dirk Web was what he was—a training manager.

Turning to look out the window again,

sitting in shabby rooms making up fantasies for strangers on the other end of a phone, for a chump's cut of the action. Shirley was a sales manager.

Her eyes traveled slowly from the floor to meet Dirk's gaze, which he hoped didn't show how eager he was to be somewhere else.

"I've got a problem," she muttered.

"We all got problems, Shirley," Dirk replied and pointed to one of the chairs.

As she sat, Shirley gave him a look that Dirk imagined taxidermists got when they came across road kill.

"It's your problem, Dirk. You guys in training. It's your damn sales negotiations program."

"What about it?"

She gave him a look that could have peeled the chrome off a Chevy bumper. "It's missing."

"What're you talkin' about?"

"I went to the schedule. No dates, no locations, no instructors. All gone."

The news hit him in the gut like a shot

fore. It was the kind of look you give a stray but cute little dog that just peed on your shoes.

"It's in the e-catalogue," she chirped at his receding back.

Dirk spun on his heel. "The what?"

"The e-catalogue."

"What the heck are you talking about? I haven't even seen the A through D catalogues."

And so began one of the strangest cases Dirk Web had ever handled.

A Few Weeks Later

It was a little after 2 a.m. when Dirk Web got back to his still-dingy, second-floor office. He was exhausted, but it was the good kind of tired that comes from cracking a tough case. He shuffled to his desk without turning on the overhead light and slumped into his battered but ergonomically correct chair. This time, all of the casters stayed on. Dirk was having a good day.

In the weak, ruby-colored light emanating from the exit sign down the

hall, Dirk carefully unloaded and cleaned his PalmPilot. Things weren't going to be the same around here, but what the heck? The same really isn't all it's cracked up to be. What a case, Dirk thought. This whole Internet thing wasn't so different from most of the mysteries he solved. Every case looks complicated at first, until you figure the angles. Then it's just a matter of using a couple of brain cells and a lot of shoe leather.

Dirk was starting to drift off to sleep when a scratching noise nearby alerted his keen senses. Suddenly, he was wide-awake. He scanned his office for a weapon and quickly grabbed a big, heavy ceramic beer stein from the top of the file cabinet. (Dirk glanced at it. It said ASTD Satellite Delivered Training Conference 1975. He knew he could spare that.)

Then he cautiously made his way down the row of cubicles toward the source of the noise. It seemed to be coming from Lois Lopesino's office. (He and Lois had been through a lot together these past few days, and they both had the scars to prove it.) Dirk leaned into the opening to her cube. There, in total darkness save for the glowing screen of her laptop, sat Lois.

"I shoulda known it was you," he said, more than a little relieved. "What the heck are you doing here?"

Lois eyed the beer stein for a moment, thought about making a comment, but decided not to go there. Instead, she looked him straight in the eyes and said, "I'm getting ready to manipulate some of your learning objects."

"Hmmm, I guess our relationship has gone a little further than I thought," Dirk replied slyly.

She gave him a look that made him seriously reconsider her Meyers-Briggs profile and said, "And we haven't even started on streaming video."

Dirk wasn't exactly sure what that was, but he had a funny feeling that this e-learning stuff wasn't going to be so bad after all. □

For *Twists, Slugs, and Roscoes: A Glossary of Hardboiled Slang*, go to <http://www.miskatonic.org/slang.html>.

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