

Mantis

by Peter Wood

In the wild, predators evolve strategy to remain inconspicuous before the fatal sting, bite or pounce and delivering the final death knell.

Humans do the same. Usually however it comes through time, through countless cuts allowing a slow drip of life-blood and stench that, when strong enough, others avoid for fear of being tainted or catching the same 'lergy.

Luckily for humans the antidote is readily available: a new job, a pint or two in peace or between friends, sex, drugs or a heart-felt sentiment stated at the right time in the right way at the right moment.

In the human jungle, the a fatal blow is rarely issued from a single predator's punch assault.

On the whole, the human jungle consists of a continual roundabout of cut, recover, cut, recover, laugh, live, regain morale, say something inappropriate, get blindsided again and recuperate. The real, true danger in the human jungle is sustaining one too many. Life-support fails, finally.

And so it goes...

Sally stands at the receptionist's booth, trying her best to retain a professional, nonchalant and inconspicuousness air by chatting to the doorman, Jimmy. Both have been given orders, strict instructions that must be carried out.

To the letter. For optimum efficiency.

On the desk is a clipboard with three pages attached to it. The paper contains the names of every person here. A total of 350 people. All names are boxed, marked and asterisked in patterns — not alphabetical or even departmental as is so often the case. *Them upstairs* can be way more wily and canny than that. With one pen swipe, using some kind of arcane justification system that even accountants would likely cry over in incomprehension, this list will become the final rollcall of souls from another soon-to-be derelict

office. A hub, a hive of industry soon to be one more Marie Celeste aimlessly riding the turning economic tides.

This is how the human jungle works: For 350 souls, today is the last time they have a name. In less than 24-hours they will dissolve into the binary codes of computer screens, shrink to the size of deli-counter ticket numbers boredly barked by unemployment office workers throughout this side of the south-east. They will become the scourge, the maligned and defeated. They will become the coal that powers political speeches of either party depending how you tot up the sums. No name will ever be mentioned or known though. All 350 will become as profound as a blank computer screen, as devastating too.

Not all of them will face this extinction; life goes on after all, and even a tragic tale needs the slight glint of light to compensate the shadows... and show how much worse it really could be.

The time is 8.45am.

Anxiety fills the mezzanine lobby like water trickling filling a swimming pool.

Sally feels her smile sag. She knows the instructions. Simply put:

If your name's on the list you can't come in.

850: Workers begin filing through the doors, still tidily dressed with crisp suits and ties organised and pristinely pressed, some still nursing coffee-chain take-out cups of their daily brew. They barely notice her or Jimmy, simply walk past, swipe their card on the electronic barrier's scanner. Instead of a short benevolent bleep followed by silent sliding open of the gate, it fails. They re-try, once, twice perhaps a third time, then flustered approach Jimmy or her.

Sally will then pounce all smiles, good mornings and a casual 'can I take your name?' Her finger will zoom down the list despite the result being pre-ordained.

Sally will then give them the news — ensuring her tone is appropriately businesslike but sympathetic. Her smile will express

apologies. Her face will turn granite impenetrable to those that dish out abuse but most will look doe-eyed apologetic for putting her through this ordeal. Such is the human jungle — no-one, predator or prey is really to blame — it's just a quirk of birth, nature, DNA, whatever. Like luck some are born with it and some... Well, you do the best you can, right?

'It can't be easy for her either.' One of the current survivors will say to his colleague in the pub later, who'll retort, 'She's just a hired-help bitch who doesn't give two fu...'

Either of them could be correct. Both are correct.

For the most part, Sally, very much a third-tier predator in this particular jungle remains oblivious to dewy-eyes and anger meted out. Why should she be anything else — she never knew them. She never argued, drank, laughed, had secret crushes or infidelities with any of them. She never liked or loathed any of them.

Pure distance.

Except for one.

There's one bloke that evades her razor-edged emotional roadblocks.

A bloke in his mid-fifties, slight left-foot limp, hair whitened with worry and age. A bloke that reminds Sally of photos of her granddad before emphysema took him.

After a litany of tears, screaming jags and clenched fists from everyone else, this one tried his card once, no more, he knew instinctively that time here had come to an end. His is the face - the only one in a merciless cull. His face will be the only one that repeats in her dreams tonight.

A lop-sided slowly collapsing gait of the man leaving the building, hand raised in a wave. That will stamp her dreams like a size 12 Doc Marten tonight.

She'll wonder what he was waving to but will never *really* understand.

