

NIGHT SOULS

A supernatural thriller novel from L H Maynard & M P N Sims

<http://maynardsimsnightsouls.webs.com/>

The second Department 18 novel www.dept18.com scheduled to be published mass market paperback by Dorchester Publishing as a Leisure novel in June 2010.

There is a race of vampire like creatures. The species is called Spiraci from the Latin to breathe. They are called Breathers. They feed on human souls. They have existed since before Man walked the Earth.

They have evolved over centuries and in the 21st they are split into three factions.

John Holly leads a global business that has franchised the feeding. He is organized and ruthless and wants to genetically modify the creatures DNA so they are less dependent on humans. They would have no need for them but would inhabit the planet.

Rachel Grey runs a second faction and wants to destroy Holly so she can operate the creatures as her fore fathers did – in the traditional manner. This would increase the feeding on humans and destroy them.

Both groups are a threat to humanity.

The third group is less organized, barely a group at all. They are led by Jason Pike who wants to stop the other two groups, and have a complete end to the feeding. This is because he was human but was turned by one of Holly's ancestors.

The action takes place over a three day period.

In London, the story begins with Robert Carter investigating suspected poltergeist activity in an apartment block. The reality is far worse.

WHERE NIGHT SOULS CAME FROM...

Over the years we have written many novels, parts of novels, and thought of and dismissed ideas for novels.

The majority have never seen the light of day. Or if they did, if we ever pulled them out, looked at them and thought, "That's not too bad," they soon objected and ran squirming back under the rock where they'd been hiding ever since we abandoned them.

Some were foetal stage, a few pages and no more; others were fully grown infants, completed at 90000 words or more. Most were fully written but

seemed to only come in at about 70% of that length; too long for novellas, too short for novels, too much in need of revision to be shown in polite company.

So we've used bits of them from time to time. Borrowed ideas and some scenes in our later work. Shelter, Demon Eyes, Black Cathedral, www.maynard-sims.com all contain the odd piece of an earlier creation, though re-written to today's standards, which we can only hope get better as we go on.

Amongst the retained unrevised scripts are a few crime thrillers, and adventure thrillers, from the times we've stepped outside the comfort blanket of our supernatural thriller writing. There is enough there to create an alter ego, a pseudonym, where a trilogy of crime thrillers, and the first in some standalone adventure thrillers can be written by elongating the 60000 words into a decent length and in revising them fully, perhaps actually make them readable. No, that's unfair; they aren't too bad, just not good enough without some work on them.

Anyway that gets us to Night Souls.

It's in supernatural thriller territory, and some. What happened was we wrote Black Cathedral to contain Department 18, the Government unit that investigates paranormal and supernatural events. www.dept18.com Leisure liked the idea and so did all the reviewers and readers. *Department 18 and Robert Carter are sure to attract a loyal following... I think Department 18 is going to do really well, and would make a great network series on TV... I think that they have themselves a franchise in the works with the characters that make up Department 18...*

So, it was pretty much a given that the next book would be a Department 18 book. Demon Eyes had been left with an open ending that seemed to need a sequel. Either that or it was a short story ending that should have been revised but hey, we started a sequel. The characters from Demon Eyes were placed in bed – figuratively and literally – with the Department 18 characters, but something wasn't gelling. There was no sexual chemistry. They looked good together, the idea was a winner on the ideas board, but as a book it was fast disappearing up it's own exhaust pipe.

What to do? We had written a fair few words, or at least one of us had. We stopped, or he did. We did what we always do when we reach a blockage in the writing process – we panicked. Len, help me, Mick. Mick, help me, Len. Don, help us... And he did. Not a quote as such but his advice was simple, "Don't do a Demon Eyes sequel (yet)."

So we had a few beers, a couple of pizzas, watched a bit of TV, and reviewed the plot we had come up with for DE2. It was pretty good, and do you know it wasn't actually dependent on it being a sequel. In fact it didn't need the characters from DE at all. In fact, once we were on a roll with the ideas, the new plot and story we came up with was far better.

So as we usually do, the writing was passed to the other one. The 50000 words written were revised and changed for the new story. A new beginning was added, Carter was inserted, careful ladies, and chapters added at various intervals to add depth to the plot and create a level of pacing that worked for the new idea. A few scenes that originally happened at night were changed to morning or afternoon, so that the story spreads out over a three day period.

People seemed to really like Department 18 in Black Cathedral and the book was enjoyed by most but a few people commented that the ending rushed up on them unexpectedly fast. We were conscious of that, and with Night Souls we did something different. The one writing the bulk of the book, Day One and Day Two as it happens, carried on and wrote those – about 80000 words (containing much of the original 50000) – while the other one was tasked to write a long ending, Day Three.

We've tried for a fast told story but with no exposition. Characters drive the narrative but the story unfolds naturally with no *deus de machina*. What happens is often a surprise but it's not manufactured for the sake of suspense.

And it's a Department 18 novel pure and simple. Something happens, they investigate it, and then it all kicks off, all Hell breaks loose, people die.

It touches on the subject of modern day slavery, and the figures quoted are accurate, as far as can be guessed at. Millions of men, women and children trafficked around the world for profit and gain. That's a real life horror.

But it's a supernatural thriller, and it's entertainment.

The original title was going to be *Breathers* but we changed that to *Dancers*. Leisure didn't like that, sounded too much like, well, a dance manual. So after some thought we came up with *Night Souls* because that just about describes what they are without giving anything away about the story. We then came up with a back story mythology about them being an alternative race to humans. The *Spiraci* was born.

Novel three for the Department is already planned out, so here's hoping people like novel two, NIGHT SOULS.

Len & Mick, England, 2009. www.maynard-sims.com



Excerpt from Chapter 1

DAY ONE

A thing of beauty is a joy forever: Its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness; but still will keep a bower quiet for us, and a sleep full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing...

John Keats

Barbarous nations breathing pure air and eating simple food enjoy immunity from its ravages.

Ambrose Bierce

1

Dunster House, Docklands, London, England

Robert Carter pulled up behind Department 18's black SUV and switched off the engine of the Lancia. The rain was beginning to ease. As he stepped out of the car he saw Frankie Morgan sheltering in the doorway of Dunster House, the very exclusive apartment block he'd been asked to investigate.

He sketched a wave and stared up at the building. Twenty-six floors of cold concrete and glass. He remembered a time when this area of London

was a run down part of the city, with streets filled with slum dwellings backing on to the River Thames. But that was before the London Docklands redevelopment program transformed the place. Millions of pounds injected by astute businessmen who saw the potential of riverside dwellings for the upwardly mobile men and women who were flooding into the area to be closer to their workplaces in the City and Canary Wharf. Now the place was unrecognizable from the dark side of the town he'd known as a child.

'Frankie, what have we got?'

'Didn't Crozier brief you?' Frankie Morgan was thirty, pretty with fair hair tied back in a pony tail from a round, open face.

'He left a message on my answering service asking me to get down here. He mentioned poltergeist activity; said you'd fill me in.'

'Not very helpful,' she said.

'When is he ever?'

'You look flushed,' she said.

'I came straight from the squash club. Are the others inside?'

'Yes. And I think it's a little bit more than poltergeist activity. The police evacuated the place yesterday after the third fatality.'

'On whose authority?'

'The Home Office.'

'So the place is empty?'

'Apart from the ghosts,' she said with a smile.

'Let's get out of this rain,' Carter said and pushed open the door to the apartment block.

Inside the others were waiting. There were three other people in Frankie's team, all of them young and fairly inexperienced. Adam Black, Chris Baines and Ellen McCrory. Frankie made the introductions.

'So Crozier thinks we can't handle this on our own. Great vote of confidence.' Baines said petulantly, glaring at Carter. Baines was in his early twenties and had an attitude that bristled with antagonism.

'It's not like that,' Frankie said.

'I've handled poltergeist cases before,' Baines said.

'So have I,' Ellen McCrory said. 'And I really don't think we need a babysitter.' At thirty-two Ellen was the oldest of the group.

'In my experience poltergeists don't kill people,' Carter said. 'How many fatalities have there been, Frankie?'

'Three.'

'So it's unlikely we're dealing with a poltergeist,' Adam Black said. Black was in his mid-twenties but looked like a teenager. Carter had read his file and had been looking forward to meeting him. Adam Black's upbringing was similar to his own. A child prodigy when it came to clairvoyance, giving readings from the age of eight. A domineering father with a God fixation who pushed his son relentlessly to the point of a nervous breakdown. Carter could sympathize.

'Unlikely, but not impossible.'

'So what do you think it is?' Baines said.

'No idea. I've only just arrived. Frankie, where was the first fatality?'

'Apartment 53. Fifth floor.'

'Ok. We'll start there. I suggest that, until we have a clearer idea of what we're dealing with here, we all stick together.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake!' Ellen McCrory said. 'We know what we're doing.'

'And we have the details of your next of kin on file, do we? Just so we know who to contact if you get killed,' Carter said.

Ellen McCrory glared at him.

Carter held her gaze until she looked away. 'Right. Let's get on. Are the elevators working, Frankie?'

'Yes. All utilities are functioning. The police just cleared the residents out and left everything else alone.'

'What were the residents told?' Carter asked her as they walked towards the two elevators set into the south wall.

'Asbestos alert,' Frankie said. 'They were told that routine maintenance had uncovered asbestos in the roof and they had to be evacuated until it was cleared. We fed the same story to the local media. Didn't want a circus down here.'

'Good idea. And all the residents swallowed it.'

'Most of them,' Frankie said. 'There were one or two who didn't believe a word of it, but they were the one's who'd had *other* experiences here, and they were only too happy to have an excuse to leave.'

With a hiss one set of doors opened. 'Okay. Fill me in on the details on the way up,' Carter said and was about to step into the elevator when the main door of the building opened and a young man wearing an Armani suit and an angry expression strode into the foyer. 'Would one of you mind telling me what the hell is going on here?'

Frankie Morgan stepped forward to intercept. 'I'm sorry, sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. For your own safety.'

'The young man raised his chin pugnaciously. 'And who the fuck are you?'

'Doctor Frances Morgan, Environmental Health. And you are?'

'Jonathan Lassiter, Braxton Developments, the company that built this block. What's all this crap about asbestos? There's no asbestos here. The building's only a year old.'

'Be that as it may, Mr. Lassiter, but I'll have to ask you to leave until the matter has been properly investigated.'

'Tough. I'm not going anywhere. Let me see some identification.'

Frankie glanced back at Carter, uncertain how to proceed.

Robert Carter sighed and walked across to join them. 'Do we have a problem, Doctor Morgan?'

'Identification,' Lassiter said. 'Now, or I call the police.'

Carter reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his pocketbook, flipping it open and letting Lassiter read his ID card.

'And what's Department 18?' Lassiter said, looking at Carter quizzically.

'Part of the Government. We've been called in by the Home Office to investigate three suspicious deaths that have occurred here in the past week.'

The color drained from Lassiter's face. 'Three deaths? Nobody told me. What are you, police?'

'We work in conjunction with the police and the security services and, as Doctor Morgan said, the Home Office. So, if there's nothing else, for your own safety, you should leave now.'

Confusion clouded Lassiter's eyes. 'I'm not happy about this,' he said. 'I don't care,' Carter said. 'Go away, and leave us to do our job.'

Lassiter hesitated for a moment, then spun on his heel and stalked from the building.

'Thanks,' Frankie said. 'I wasn't sure what to do when he asked for identification.'

'Always tell the truth, Frankie,' Carter said. 'Within reason,' he added with a smile. 'Come on, let's get to work.'

Carter was thirty-five, tall and slim with an athletic physique he owed to the four hours a week he spent at the gym, combined with regular games of squash and rackets. The exercise was complemented by a healthy diet, apart from far too many cigarettes, a light intake of alcohol, and occasional sex with willing partners.

Frankie turned the key in the door of apartment 53 and pushed it open, reeling back as the stench hit her like a physical blow. She clamped her hand over her nose and mouth and struggled to prevent herself from gagging. 'Jesus! What *is* that?' she said.

'I can't smell anything,' Baines said.

Ellen McCrory shook her head. 'Nothing.'

Robert Carter was watching them. He worried about Frankie Morgan sometimes. She was too open; her senses too attuned. She needed to protect herself more. He lowered his defenses slightly and sniffed the air. Yes, she was right. There was an odor; something rank and fetid; something long dead. He stepped through the doorway.

'Very nice,' Chris Baines said as he followed the others into the room. 'Wouldn't mind a place like this myself. Look at the size of that TV.'

'Concentrate,' Carter snapped at him. 'Frankie, are you okay?'

She was last into the room and now had a handkerchief pressed against her nose. 'It's fading,' she said. 'The smell's nowhere near so strong once you're inside.'

From his pocket Carter took a small black box with a dial at its center and a small white dome on one end. There was a switch on the side. He flicked it on. The needle jumped across the dial. 'Strong electro-magnetic residue,' he said. 'Be careful.'

'The death occurred in the bedroom. Melanie Fry, thirty-two, commodities analyst,' Frankie said.

'How did she die?'

'The autopsy was inconclusive. Four puncture wounds to her thorax, but small, not enough on their own to kill her. The pathologist could find no other injuries. In his words, it was as if she had just been switched off. As if someone had thrown a switch and she just died.'

Carter walked through to the bedroom and looked around. It was smart and neat with a low, oak-framed, king-sized bed taking up the center of the room. The rest of the furniture was modern and plain, Shaker style. 'There's nothing here,' he said. 'I'm picking nothing up.'

'How do you explain the smell?' Frankie said.

'An echo, I suspect. Nothing more.' He held out the meter in front of him and scanned the room. 'Are you sure this is where she died.'

'She was found in bed. Naked, spread-eagled. Looked like she'd been enjoying a sex session when she died.'

Carter shrugged. 'I'd expect there to be more residual energy than I'm picking up.' He slipped the meter back into his pocket. 'Okay. The second death. Which floor?'

'We go up,' Frankie said. 'Apartment 120. Seventeenth floor.'

'Right, let's get on,' Carter said.

Chris Baines had already left apartment 53 and was making his way to the stairwell. Ellen McCrory was close behind him. 'Where are you going?' she said.

'Up,' Baines said. 'I'm getting nothing on this floor, but something's nagging me to climb. Coming?'

'And you don't care if you upset Carter.' It wasn't a question, and the grin on her face encouraged him.

'Come on then.' He pulled open the door to the stairwell and started to climb the stairs two at a time.

By the time they reached the tenth floor Ellen McCrory was panting for breath.

'It's time you quit smoking,' Baines said.

'What are you, my father? Why didn't we take the elevator?'

'Not safe,' Baines said, every nerve in his body tingling.

'But we just used it.'

'Well it's not safe now. Trust me. Come on.' He pushed open the door to the tenth floor. He stood for a moment, eyes closed, letting the random impressions flood into his mind. *Black shapes slithering across the floor, coalescing, becoming a much larger mass, rising up and moving through the apartments. A woman's scream. Pain. Death.* 'This way,' he said, his eyes snapping open.

Ellen watched him nervously, her maverick spirit starting to dissipate. She'd worked with Chris Baines before and knew he was a risk taker. She found it an attractive attribute and, if she was honest with herself, a bit of a turn on, but she was beginning to have second thoughts about leaving the others behind.

She was getting her own impressions of the place and they weren't good. Not good at all.

'Did you see that?' she said, squinting her eyes and peering along the plush, carpeted corridor.

'See what?' Baines said. He was looking from door to door, trying to focus, to feel where he should lead them next.

'Something black, moving, down at the end of the corridor. It went into one of the rooms.'

'Describe it,' he said, turning his attention back to her.

'Like a black sheet, blown in the wind, but not as substantial. Like gauze.'

He grinned at her. 'Come on. Show me the room.' He strode off down the corridor, Ellen following tentatively a few paces behind.

'Where are McCrory and Baines?' Carter asked as he came out of the bedroom and saw Adam Black standing alone in the lounge.

Black shrugged. 'One minute they were here, the next they'd gone.'
Carter swore and wheeled on Frankie. 'Are your team always this undisciplined?'

'No, Robert,' she said bristling. 'But they're used to carrying out these investigations unsupervised. They're both strong psychics and they're more than capable of looking after themselves.'

'Let me be the judge of that,' Carter said. 'We don't know what we're dealing with here yet, and until we know what the danger is I don't want anyone taking unnecessary risks. Come on, let's find them.'

'We'd better check floor by floor,' Frankie said trying to wrest back some element of control from Carter. She knew why he was so angry. A routine investigation he'd been heading a few months ago had ended tragically with the disappearance of his assistant, Sian Davies. Some members of the Department were convinced he'd never really got over it. 'We'll take the stairs and search thoroughly.'

'Up or down?' Adam Black said.

Carter turned to the young man who was scuffing the toe of his shoe on the deep-piled carpet in a mixture of anxiety and embarrassment, and avoiding eye contact. 'Pardon?'

'Up or down,' Black said again. 'We don't know which way to go.'

'Up,' Carter said.

'Why?'

Carter fixed him with a cold hard stare. 'Because I say so.'

'You're the boss,' Black said without malice.

'And I just wish people would remember that,' Robert Carter said and walked from the apartment.

Jonathan Lassiter was seething. He walked backwards and forwards on the street outside Dunster House, punching numbers into his cell phone and wallowing in the frustration of not being able to raise anyone significant at this time of day. The frustration was feeding his anger. He couldn't believe he'd been dismissed from the block in such a high-handed way, as if he were nothing more than an errant schoolboy caught loitering indoors during recess.

He snapped his phone shut and dropped it back into the pocket of his suit jacket. He suddenly became aware of the rain, soaking his hair, his Armani, and his Gucci loafers. This was intolerable. He turned on his heel and pushed open the door of Dunster House and walked inside out of the rain.

Once inside he looked around for someone to vent his anger on, but the foyer was deserted. He swore savagely and crossed the marble tiled floor to the elevator, punching the call button, tapping his foot impatiently as he waited for the elevator to descend. Once the doors slid open he stepped inside, staring at the panel of buttons for a long moment before making a decision. Finally he pulled his bunch of keys from his pocket, inserted one into the panel and twisted it, at the same time hitting the button for the penthouse.

As the car started to ascend he leaned back against the wall, taking out a handkerchief and dabbing away the rain from his face. He'd only been up to the penthouse twice before and that was pre-occupation. Now the luxurious apartment was owned by an Asian businessman who had made his fortune in the clothing trade.

It would be interesting to see how the mega-rich lived. It was a lifestyle he aspired to but knew he was a long way from attaining. He also wanted to be up at the top of the building when the bunch of morons from the Home Office, or wherever they were from, arrived there. He'd show them he wasn't fazed by their scare mongering and that Braxton as a company stood by the quality of their developments.

The elevator juddered to a halt between the twenty first and twenty second floor. He twisted the key and pressed the button again but the car didn't budge. He ran his hand over the panel, hitting all the buttons, but nothing happened.

He was suddenly aware that the temperature in the car was dropping. A few seconds later his breath started to mist in front of his face and he shivered. He sniffed the air and recoiled as the stench of rotting meat filled his nostrils.

As the first black shape slithered in under the door Jonathan Lassiter felt a tremor of disquiet. *What the hell was going on?*

Chris Baines hesitated outside the door of apartment 85 and rested his hand on the door. There was something inside. He could sense it.

'Well?' Ellen said, catching up with him.

'Can't you feel it?'

She shook her head, chewing pensively at her bottom lip.

'You're blocking.'

'You betcha,' she said. 'I'm not leaving myself open to attack. Three people have *died*, Chris.'

'Okay,' he said. 'Stay behind me.' He slipped the key-card into the lock and turned the handle.

It was dark inside the apartment, despite the onset of early morning. He slid his hand across the wall and located the light switch. He flipped it but the room stayed dark.

'The lights should be working,' Ellen said, a tremor to her voice.

'Relax,' he said and pulled a flashlight from the bag he had slung over his shoulder. He switched it on and swung the beam around the room, drawing in his breath when the light flickered over a figure sitting in a chair by the window. He pulled the beam back, aiming it directly at the chair but he couldn't see any more clearly. There was a figure there, but it seemed to be absorbing the light, sucking it in like a black hole.

'We should go back and fetch Carter,' Ellen said, clutching the sleeve of his jacket,

'Shhhhh! Hello!' he called to the figure in the chair. 'I'm Chris Baines; this is my assistant, Ellen McCrory.'

The figure in the chair remained silent and unmoving.

'We were told this building was empty. Would you mind telling us what you're doing here?'

Ellen tugged at his sleeve. 'Chris? Chris! Let's get out of here.'

As she spoke the figure in the chair started to rise. They still couldn't see properly. It was just a shape, the build of a large man, darker than the surrounding darkness.

They took a step backwards. Ellen clamped a hand across her nose as a foul odor hit her like a physical blow.

'God! I think I'm going to be sick.' She started to retch.

Baines focused the flashlight, willing the beam to glow brighter, but it was useless. The light was being swallowed. There was a sound, like dry autumn leaves blown across concrete, and the shape exploded, fragmenting into a hundred smaller shapes that skittered across the floor, flapping and flailing like disembodied blackbird wings. The shapes moved past them, plucking at their clothes, slithering over their skin.

Ellen screamed.

Chris Baines dropped the flashlight and sank to his knees, folding his arms over his head as he was buffeted by the shapes.

The apartment door slammed and it was all over. The stench and the shapes had gone.

Baines gradually uncurled his arms from his head, picked up the flashlight, and stood upright. He shone the beam around the room. Ellen was standing at the window with her back to him as if staring out at the street below. 'Ellen? Ellie?'

She didn't move; didn't acknowledge him at all.

He took a few steps forward, reached out and touched her shoulder. 'Ellie?'

At his touch Ellen McCrory crumpled to the floor, deflating like a burst balloon.

The flashlight's beam took in the withered skin of her face, the bleached white, cotton-candy texture of her hair. Her mouth sagged open and Chris Baines watched as her teeth crumbled to dust and fell away.

And then he screamed too.

He was still screaming when the others found him five minutes later.

EXCERPT ENDS



**Sandy Auden managed to get a few discreet words from a
Department 18 insider and put the outcome up at
www.sfsite.com**

[SFSite.com Interview September 2009](http://www.sfsite.com)

<http://maynardsimsnightsouls.webs.com/>

FRONT COVER OF THE BOOK

“A voice both uniquely entertaining and profoundly disturbing.”
—Brian Keene, Author of Darkness on the Edge of Town

NIGHT SOULS
A Department 18 Novel

L. H. MAYNARD & M. P. N. SIMS
Authors of Black Cathedral

BACK COVER OF THE BOOK

Department 18: Government agents specializing in the paranormal and associated psychic phenomena, including hauntings, poltergeist activity, demonic possession and other unexplained occurrences. All files highly classified.

“Maynard & Sims know what makes a horror story tick.” — Shivers

They have existed since before Man walked the earth. They are the Breathers, a species of vampire-like creatures that feed on human souls. They have evolved over the centuries and now are split into two warring factions. Both are a threat to mankind. As the battle lines are drawn, Robert Carter and Department 18 are caught in the middle. They are all that stand between the two sides and their unsuspecting prey. Us.

“Maynard & Sims are a horror duo that know how to scare the reader.”
—The Horror Review

“Amazing. One of the most frightening books of the year.”
—Famous Monsters of Filmland on Black Cathedral

“Maynard & Sims make readers accept terrible denizens from nightmare as casual fact.” —Cemetery Dance

\$7.99 US
\$9.99 CAN
£5.99 UK
\$14.95 AUS

www.dorchesterpub.com



'With their slick style and eye for the macabre, Maynard and Sims take their readers on a rollercoaster of sensory delight. If you've been crazy enough to miss them so far then grab their next book and jump on for the ride. Prepare to be thrilled and you won't be disappointed!'
- Sarah Pinborough, author of *Tower Hill*.

“Maynard & Sims -- two of my favorite literary necromancers -- have done it again! Turn down the lights, lock the windows, curl up by the fire, and prepare for a long night...” *Steve Susco, The Grudge.*

<http://maynardsimsnightsouls.webs.com/>





People are saying NIGHT SOULS is a work of fiction.

The United Kingdom Government have a department within their M15/M16 sections that operates outside the levels of authority that distinguish the two recognised spheres of security.

Over our many years of writing supernatural fiction we have been aware of covert surveillance on several occasions. These have generally coincided with the publication of our books of supernatural stories.

People are saying NIGHT SOULS is a work of fiction.

Recently we were made aware of a website that this department operates. We feature on it. The Government has investigated – whatever that means, as they have never spoken with us – so far as we know – some of the background to our stories.

Now we admit that several stories have a factual root to them. Hauntings are often spoken about before they are written about. Legend and rumour are the traditional seedbeds of stories that grow around a campfire until they pass into the history of an area.

People are saying NIGHT SOULS is a work of fiction.

When we became linked with the back story behind NIGHT SOULS we didn't believe it. We both have London connections, and Len has been to Poland. We both have some knowledge of the paranormal. We thought we had some knowledge of the way British Government works.

The closer we got, the longer the story progressed and the links became entwined, so we realised we had to forget what we *knew*. Anything we had written about ghosts, and demons, about shadows at midnight, and echoes in the darkness, was just fiction.

www.dept18.com

**PEOPLE ARE SAYING NIGHT
SOULS IS A WORK OF FICTION.
IT IS NOT...**

STOP PRESS

We have lifted this from the website of
DEPARTMENT 18.
www.dept18.com

CASE D18 / 2010 60.

TOP SECRET...

This case is classified CODE PURPLE.
Level 6 sanction required for access.

***Code name -
NIGHT SOULS***

- A highly sensitive piece of Department information appears to have been leaked to the public domain.
- A series of case investigations have been infiltrated.
- A piece of fiction in the form of a novel is to be published.
- This is to appear in USA under the Leisure imprint of Dorchester Publishing (see www.dorchesterpub.com)
- This 'novel' is by long standing supernatural writers L H Maynard & M P N Sims, both subject to long term surveillance by the UK Government, primarily through the Department.
- This book implicates not only D18 but also certain offices of the US Government.
- It also involves in direction association the UK

Government which makes the publication highly sensitive.

- The book is due for publication in June 2010.
- We have tried to halt progress but without success.
- It is further understood a further novel is being written which also features D18.
- If the NIGHT SOULS revelations are anything to judge by then this could prove harmful to national security.
- Associates are named accurately in the book.
- Certain incidents are described in full and accurate detail.
- Personal information about D18 members is revealed, some of it highly sensitive in nature.
- Publicity is sought under www.maynard-sims.com
- It is understood by our sources that this website is being updated to strongly feature the Department and in particular this novel.

ACTION –

All references to this book are to be flagged as Critical and passed automatically to level 5.



“In the space of a mere 3 novels, they have proven their ability to effortlessly put horror readers through the ringer time and again. Their novels don’t merely command your attention, they squeeze your nerves with death-grip power. This is real, unapologetic, scary stuff.” *Gary Braunbeck, 5-time Bram Stoker Award-Winner.*

PEOPLE ENJOYED BLACK CATHEDRAL

“Black Cathedral” is an exciting adventure in the dark fantastic, a dark and twisted “Mission: Impossible”. With this opening tale, Sims and Maynard have crafted an attention grabber that's exciting and frightening. Like The Dresden Files, Department 18 and Robert Carter are sure to attract a loyal following. Shroud Magazine

<http://shroudmagazinebookreviews.blogspot.com/2009/03/black-cathedral-leisure-fiction-by-l-h.html>

“Wow, what a book. This is one truly frightening tale. Maynard & Sims hit this one out of the park.”

FAMOUS MONSTERS OF FILMLAND

<http://famousmonstersoffilmland.com/2009/01/05/literary-review-black-cathedral-by-lh-maynard-mpn-sims/>

“This is a must read book and one I found hard to put down. It reads fast but

satisfying. It is horror but with real people in it. I think Department 18 is going to do really well, and would make a great network series on TV."

http://www.amazon.com/Black-Cathedral-L-H-Maynard/dp/0843961996/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1226853786&sr=1-1

"...elegant and intelligent horror that smiles benignly while sliding icy daggers deep into the bone marrow just to watch the blood pool and grow black, combining psychological and visceral horror into a new and unforgettable pattern."

http://thecelebritycafe.com/books/full_review/1583.html

"A creepy sort of haunted house horror story that will keep you turning pages late into the night".

<http://www.shelfari.com/books/4451063/Black-Cathedral/bookthread?reviewid=893689>

"A fun sort of haunted house tale that brings to mind the old Poltergeist TV show."

<http://bookbitch.com/BOOK%20REVIEWS.htm>

"Tapping into some of our deepest primal fears, Maynard and Sims have created a dark horror story that will keep the pages turning long into the night."

http://www.monstersandcritics.com/books/science_fiction_fantasy/reviews/article_1450427.php/Book_Review_Black_Cathedral

"Once again Maynard & Sims has contrived to create a powerful work of fiction, which reminds me of one of those nightmares that make you glad to wake up and find out it was just a dream."

<http://www.horrorworld.org/reviews.htm>

"Black Cathedral is a masterful haunted house tale that reminded me of the old film, 'The Legend of Hell House'."

http://www.mania.com/weekly-book-buzz-books-thankful-for_article_111353.html

"Once again Maynard & Sims has contrived to create a powerful work of fiction, which reminds me of one of those nightmares that make you glad to wake up and find out it was just a dream." Mario Guslandi

<http://www.horrorworld.org/reviews.htm>

Black Cathedral - Horror of the first water.

"Meticulous in its historical detail and infinitely more frightening than the most bloody, gruesome nightmare, Black Cathedral seductively twists the world with surprising and deceptive ease. Maynard and Sims are erudite horror stylists whose stories leave a lingering shiver of delicious terror that leave the reader wanting more."

<http://www.authorlink.com/bookreviews/detail/352>

"L.H. Maynard and M.P.N. Sims have themselves a winner here and I think that

they have themselves a franchise in the works with the characters that make up Department 18. This is a book to watch out for, and one that really grabs you from the first chapter on. L.H. Maynard and M.P.N. Sims are a horror duo that knows how to scare the reader and suck them down into their horrific stories. Pick this one up when it hits book shelves in January and get ready for a whole new paranormal experience with Department 18."

Review by Horror Bob

<http://www.horrorreview.com/2008/blackcathedralbook2008.html>

"L.H. Maynard and M.P.N. Sims once again write a scary horror story that will frighten the audience into leaving all lights on."

[Genre Go Round](#)

Alternate Worlds Review by Harriet Klausner

<http://www.alternative-worlds.com/2008/11/09/black-cathedral-lh-maynard-and-mpn-sims/>

Comments on Good Reads:

"Great, scary read. I would love to see this book made into a movie. I was seeing it in my head as I read it. Very creepy."

"I've enjoyed the books I've read by Maynard and Sims. They have such an elegant approach to horror that makes the horror much more frightening and, at times, visceral."

<http://maynardsimsnightsouls.webs.com/>

We were asked to submit to a book but our contribution wasn't required so here it is -

**LH MAYNARD & MPN SIMS LIST OF 10 THINGS
PEOPLE CALL HORROR WHEN THEY ARE AGED 15
AND IS THE LIST DIFFERENT WHEN THEY REACH THE AGE OF 55?**

Horror is in the eye of the beholder. Isn't that right? Something like horror anyway. Perhaps it's called fear where you come from; perhaps the resilient might think of it as unease. Or terror, fright, scary, call it what you will. When you are 15 there are a whole bunch of things that seem to conspire to make life as unpleasant as can be. By the time you get to a creakingly old 55 life can be just as tiresome, but for the same reasons? Many 15 year olds are fearless but full of terror. Many 55 year olds are terrifying but that's a whole other story.

1. A 15 year old finds to his horror that his erection can sometimes feel permanent. In front of class to read his essay – wham. In the morning while eating breakfast with his parents – bam. Whenever a girl appears – thank you ma'am.

A 55 year old would love to feel his erection at all. Keeping it semi permanent is a constant fear. Terror at losing the plot mid sentence is a regular companion.

Same state of physical arousal but different perspective of horror.

2. A 15-year-old fears they will never have a boyfriend or girlfriend, never meet that special one. A 55-year-old wishes they had never had met... The fear of being buried alive.
3. A 15 year old finds most things terrifying because every situation is new. A 55-year-old worries they will never find anything feels new again...ever.
The horror of everlasting life?
4. A 15 year old finds it horrifying that they might have to spend another 5 or more years learning stuff that they already find boring. They hate having to work at school and listen and pay attention.
A 55 year old is scared that they didn't pay enough attention at school, and it's too late now, and anyway, they could be dead in another 5 or more years.
5. A 15 year old finds war frightening, and poverty terrible, and inequality horrible, and they are going to do something about it.
A 55 year old finds war frightening, and poverty terrible, and inequality horrible, yet knows there is nothing they can do about it.
6. To a 15-year-old fan of horror there are endless possibilities for fictional horror. A walk alongside a misty river at dusk, a bare graffiti scarred urban street, a silent graveyard at midnight. Every situation seems to resonate with significance as the essence of horror stories lives inside every mood, every place they visit, every thought they have.
A 55-year-old fan of horror can just about remember the moods that used to evoke those feelings of dread. Nowadays there needs to be good characters, a plot, a storyline, and something new to get the juices flowing.
A vampire's curse?
7. To a 15 year old any social situation holds unspoken horrors. My hair might be messed, my clothes might not be cool, I might not know what to say – I'll definitely not know what to say. A social situation? I'll spill my drink, get food in my teeth, insult people unwittingly, tell unsuitable jokes, be the only one not telling unsuitable jokes.
Actually a 55 year old feels pretty much the same – they just care less about it.
Haunting fears.
8. A 15 year old finds it terrifying when they have to say something, and they find it scary when they can't think of anything to say.

At 55 you know it doesn't really matter what you say as long as you say something, and only then do people realise you haven't actually got anything to say.

9. At 15 you find your body horrible – too fat, thin, tall, short, hair too long, short, face spotty, pale, everything.
At 55 you think the same but with good reason.
Frankenstein lives...
10. At 15 you are scared of the first kiss, will you do it right, will they laugh.
At 55 you're scared that kiss might be your last, and will your partner find out...

If you're 15 you can't ever imagine being so old as to be 55.
If you're 55 you can barely remember what it was like to be 15.

Two ages, one horror.



BIOGRAPHY: LH Maynard & MPN Sims.

Len Maynard & Mick Sims www.maynard-sims.com

Their first supernatural novel, Shelter, was published mass market in July 2006 by Leisure in USA. Their second, Demon Eyes, was a December 2007 publication by Leisure, and the third, Black Cathedral, the first Department 18 book, was published early 2009, with a fourth, Night Souls, the second Department 18 book, scheduled for June 2010 publication.

They are also working on a crime thriller trilogy series of novels and three adventure thriller novels. www.michaeljamesleonard.com is under construction. Scripts from their ghost stories are being developed.

Numerous stories have been published in a variety of anthologies and magazines, including the Mammoth Book of Best New Horror, the anthology, Strange Tales, which won the World Fantasy Award 2004 and the Del Rey anthology, The Children Of Cthulhu

Collections include, Shadows At Midnight, 1979 and 1999 (revised and enlarged), Echoes Of Darkness, 2000, Incantations, 2002, two retrospective collections of their stories, essays and interviews, The Secret Geography Of Nightmare and Selling Dark Miracles, both 2002, one introduced by Hugh Lamb and the other by Stephen Jones, and Falling Into Heaven in 2004.

Novellas, Moths, The Hidden Language Of Demons, The Seminar, and Double Act, have been published in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2007 respectively.

They worked as editors on the first seven volumes of Darkness Rising, and the two annual Darkness Rising anthologies. They co-edited and published F20 with The British Fantasy Society. As editors/publishers they ran Enigmatic Press in the UK,

which produced Enigmatic Tales, and its sister titles. They wrote essays for the Mark Chadbourn website At The World's End.

AGENT Ian Drury, Sheil Land Associates Ltd, Literary, Theatre and Film Agents. 52 Doughty Street, London, WC1N 2LS Phone 0207 405 9351 Fax 0207 831 2127 idrury@sheiland.co.uk info@sheiland.co.uk www.sheiland.co.uk

Personal contact can be made at Michael@micksims.f9.co.uk or len@lenmaynard.co.uk

3 Cutlers Close, St Michaels Mead, Bishops Stortford, Herts, CM23 4FW, England
And they can also be found at <http://www.myspace.com/maynardsims>

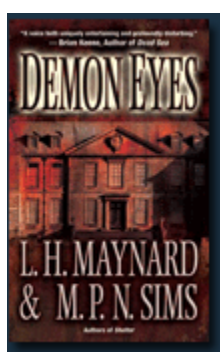
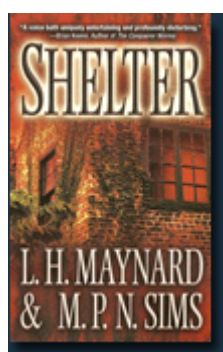
On Facebook, separately under Len Maynard & Michael Sims.

And they have a message board at <http://www.horrorworld.org/massmarket.htm>

They are mentioned at www.dept18.com



<http://maynardsimsnightsouls.webs.com/>



www.dept18.com

www.maynard-sims.com

**and this story taken from Falling Into Heaven our 2004 Sarob collection and has
nothing to do with Department 18**

SLIDING DOWN THE SLIPPERY SLIP

L H MAYNARD & M P N SIMS

I bought the bottle from a back street shop at Ponders End. Elvis Presley served me. I thought it was odd at first because he shortchanged me, and the King hadn't been known for that kind of thing, not in any of the books or TV programmes I'd seen anyway. I assumed he was on some of that medication he was noted for in his latter years, but he should still serve the customers properly. It wasn't until I'd loaded my groceries into the car and was checking the store receipt that I realised he'd given me fifty pence too little in my change. I would have gone back and made a scene but I remembered the look in his eyes as he handed me my money. He knew he was dead, I'm sure of it.

I mentioned it to Jimi when I got back, but he just shrugged and gave one of his modest little laughs before drifting off into a Voodoo Chile riff, that was all muffled fuzz and high string beacons of sound.

I buried the dog and made some sandwiches for lunch, which I ate, with a nice bottle of Vouvray, on the patio in the garden. I felt like Hannibal Lector when I said that to myself, 'a nice bottle of...' just like in the film, although I hadn't eaten the dog; or anyone else, not for a long time.

My friends were coming round in the evening and I liked to prepare something special for them. We'd known each other for years, though not from school. I hadn't enjoyed school, with the name-calling and the crush of people everywhere, meaning there was never any space that one could call one's own. I didn't think I would have wanted to keep in touch with people from those happiest days of my life and so I hadn't, which was just as well as none of them seemed that keen on making arrangements with me after the last day. The last day was emotional as Vinnie Jones said in that film, but for me it seemed a little false to promise to not lose touch with girls I had spent years trying to avoid, even going to the extreme of spending morning and afternoon breaks and lunch hours in the toilet cubicles so I didn't have to mix with them.

I know that's two references I've made to films and so it may seem they are a particular interest of mine, but really they aren't. I just have the kind of mind that relates things to quotes sometimes, and at other times to passages I might have read in books. I like to read as well as to watch films. My mother used to say I lived too much in my mind and not enough in the real world, but if the characters I watched and read about seemed alive to me where's the harm? It was better for me to distance myself from people I met by assuming the identity through a few words and phrases of fictional characters; was better, and still is. Anyhow, mother is dead now so it doesn't matter.

My friends were due round at a little before eight, for our regular bridge, dinner and drinks evening. It was harmless enough though we occasionally had a wager on the results. Competition was often quite fierce, though I could rarely raise the level of my enthusiasm for that side of it beyond mild interest. I

enjoyed the company, as I was trying very hard to get back into what was termed normal society now that my medication had been deemed unnecessary.

Lists are a typical symptom of the chronically obsessed so I was making a real effort not to list everything I did. Obviously there were still issues that had to be logged, but if I kept it to essentials I felt better and believed I could see the way to true recovery. At my worst I didn't even have to write things down. The lists reverberated around inside my head, like an ever-revolving tape loop, a perpetual motion of checking and re-checking, of mentally filing things away, only to spread them out again in my brain and begin the process of scheduling them all over. I would list my possessions by category, and then break those down by area of the house in which they were placed. That doesn't sound very clear so I'll give an example. Say it was my bathroom things, a little personal I know so I shan't go into full feminine hygiene detail. I would list, in my mind of course, bathroom, and then go into smaller perspective by listing, flannel, soap, then bottles of perfume, talcum, toothpaste. Usually after a few days of this the list was so practised that the items stayed in the same place within the list. Though if I was tired or was interrupted, things got displaced and it might be necessary to start again. After a few months I added a failsafe procedure so that if I was stopped before I had got to the end I didn't have to begin at the very beginning and list every room; that idea saved a lot of time, though it did mean I listed the whole itinerary more often each day, because the task took less time.

The bottle was full, of course, and properly sealed, which is perhaps the reason behind the enigmatic glance Elvis gave me. He may have suspected my purpose, possibly even shared my anticipation, but I suspected he was more likely to be planning his comeback than bothering with the secrets a thin, sandy-blond haired woman in her late thirties was going to take to fill her bottle, her own bottle.

Why mother called me Thujone I have no idea, but it served to increase the isolation at school, and in early adult life as well. People couldn't spell it, forever making it into 'two-john', or 'through-joan', neither of which made any sense. Not that the real spelling or pronunciation used to make any sense to me either; not until a doctor in the first hospital told me about the green goddess. My purpose was set in those few moments, and no manner of treatment, no amount of electrode activity could divert me.

Jim Morrison used to write of 'weird scenes inside the goldmine', but goldmines produce a substance of beauty and value. The scenes inside my head were more industrialised than artistic, the repetitive lists infinitely more stark than attractive. My scenes were a fool's gold of stifled emotion. I mentioned this to Jim once and he issued an expletive that I took to be an offer, but I declined. It was during his bloated and bearded stage, and while his whiskies and lime were green, it's true, they were not as vividly so as the substance.

My apartment in Notting Hill is considered to be quite desirable nowadays, but when mother and father owned the shop around the corner it was merely convenient. They meant to have more than one child but mother said it never worked out. I know she suffered at least five miscarriages, both before and after me, and for years I blamed myself for them. I must have jumped on her at the wrong time, in innocent childish play, but harmful

nonetheless. I couldn't have influenced the ones that preceded me, naturally, unless what one doctor had told me was true and my need to be wanted overshadowed all else, even producing physical symptoms alongside the psychological ones. Those physical implications could easily have been the nature's terminations that mother suffered – brought on by an anticipation of my overwhelming desire to be needed, all day and every day.

The apartment is special to me and always will be. Mother died here, and although father struggled on for a few months afterwards, he was eaten away by his grief, or guilt, I was never quite sure which. Eaten away, a strange phrase, but apt because that is the best description of what happened to him. Gradually there was less of him; he shrivelled on a daily basis, until I thought I would soon be able to fold him into the pocket of my coat and take him for a walk in the park. Perhaps pop him out if it was a nice day and let the sun warm his bones and the diaphanous skin that covered them.

The kitchen opened out onto a small terrace that was the head of the small garden. It was a lovely place in which to prepare food. I could have the terrace doors open and let the sun and the busy noises from the streets around waft in as though they were scents from a Parisian evening. I could close my eyes and imagine the Eiffel skeleton, the cafes and the boulevards, the elegance and the mystery.

My bottle was empty by now, and yet next to the new and untouched one it beckoned like a stranger from a black windowed taxi parked along the pavement by the Seine. It was alluring but dangerous, promising excitement but at a cost that might be too high a price for me.

I took a glass from the cabinet, a crystal tumbler, poured ice into it and swilled the cubes around, wallowing in the sound they made as they connected. The bottle opened freely, as if it was already prepared for me. I placed my perforated spoon over the glass where it fitted perfectly; it was a beautiful object, crafted from the finest silver, and bought from Camden market many years ago. The sugar I spilled onto the spoon, leaving the actual liquid until last. The green liquor flowed mystically through the sugar, and where it touched the already melting ice it was tinged with an opaque milky white colour that offset the beautiful emerald green. Then the sip, that first taste on the tongue. I have to confess that, coupled with the medication, a single glass of absinthe does set my imagination in turmoil, and the damage to my carefully constructed lists is bloody. I pay for it for days after a binge, but as I have become older the logic of drinking each day has become obvious.

There are some that prefer the traditional method of pouring water through the sugar and into the already waiting liquor but the resultant colour is so absent of green that I feel it becomes another drink altogether.

With the glass fully drunk, and the bottle re-sealed, I can begin to prepare the food for the evening. But, no, the initial glass is, naturally, never quite enough, the essence not wholly absorbed. And so another, the ritual repeated and the new bottle is now well on its path to oblivion. I arrived there many a long year ago.

By the end of the evening the new bottle will be empty, ready to be filed away until the next time, while my own bottle, my trusted friend, will be full to the overflowing.

There are friends that find the décor of my home a little overwhelming. I like green. The dreams that are caught by the colour are the most vivid of all. I lay asleep and by morning the images and thoughts that escape from my head at night are held by the spider's web dampness of the greenness. It is as though the dew that caresses the grass outside is translated into my rooms as an invisible filter, coating the walls with a rainbow of ideas and trapping my unconscious dream world as though the fantasies are poured into a bottle and sealed for later use.

The bedroom mirrors the green fairy in its sharp emeralds; the sitting room is paler, an attempt at faded elegance; the hallway a whiter shade of green; the bathroom is different shades of the colour, from the dark tiles to the pastel fittings; and the kitchen has washed effect cupboard fronts, dark green cooker and fridge, and lighter green tiles on the walls and floor. I feel as if I am held safe by a field, by a forest, by the contents of the bottle itself.

The dog did not enjoy absinthe, what can I say. He had been with me for a while, since I was finally signed away from the hospital, even the outpatient clinics. I hated taking him for walks and so the garden had to suffice. He soon bored of its restrictive perimeters, and so one evening, while the darkness invaded yet the night was warm enough for nakedness, I shared with him some of the liquid from my bottle. Perhaps he would have been safer with the pure liquor but I was in a capricious mood - there were many inside me that night, and I wanted him to join me in the special fluids. He convulsed fairly quickly and, well in a human the phrase would be 'he wasn't feeling himself.' He certainly wasn't himself after the drink, which he lapped up like water in a desert. He died within the hour.

I had decided salmon for the main meal, with asparagus to start and a chocolate tart to finish. There was wine of course, different for each course, and naturally the new bottle; my friends wouldn't mind that it wasn't a virgin.

Preparing the food always put me in a good mood. I love the feel of the different textures on my fingers, the aroma of the spices and herbs, the sauces slowly cooking on the hob. I desired a third glass, there would be plenty for all, and so at a convenient juncture in preparation I conducted the ritual again. With the glass in my hand I wandered through to the bathroom and began to pour a bath.

My bath time routine never varies, as dependable as my lists. I leave the glass on the side of the bath, the steam from the hot water dusting the sides of the glass with mute moisture. In my bedroom I undressed with sensuous purpose, even though I was physically alone. It added to my anticipation of the evening. My dress I unzipped behind me, then turned to the mirror and smiled, letting the shoulder straps drape down while holding it in place over my breasts. Then I turn away and let the dress pool at my feet, stepping out of it with a minimum of fuss. My bra is low cut and emphasises the size and shape of each breast, pushing them together slightly as if by a man's hands. I turn back to face the mirror and pull one strap down, then the other. Turn away again and unfasten the hooks at the back; face the front once more and drop the bra, keeping each full breast covered with my arm. The swell of each breast against the skin of my arm is already enjoyable. Then the arm moves slowly away, caressing my stomach and beyond, while the nipples of my breasts harden and seem to darken in the half-light of dusk. My panties, like the bra, are black, and cut very high in the leg, and with their

thin strap at the back they disappear between my buttocks, accentuating the curves of my legs and bottom. I position myself so the mirror can see me from the rear and then bend forward, grasping my ankles, swaying my hips for a few seconds before standing, facing the mirror and pushing one hand into the panties at the front, touching and parting. Often I leave it there, unfinished business, but tonight I feel will be special and I seductively remove the panties, throw them at the mirror with a blown kiss, and go for my bath.

Any time for relaxation is always a good opportunity to list. I can generally lie in the bath for a good half an hour and finish the whole rota. Tonight I finished in about twenty-five minutes and I took that as an omen for the evening. It had been a while since my bottle was drunk and the re-filling was overdue.

I dried my body and dressed in a loose linen shift that allowed warmth and light to invade and left me feeling like a slave girl from ancient Rome. When I was first taken into hospital I made the mistake that many who are new to something make, I believed what I was told. I believed it when they said they were only there to help me, that it was for my own good, that I should tell them everything as that was the only way they could help me. So I did. I told them about father, and how I ate parts of him as his body dissipated. I told them about the friends and occasional enemies that come into my head when I least expect it. Obviously I don't always do as they tell me, but when they suggest something that seems like fun, well, there's only me to account to isn't there?

Once, and only once, I told them about absinthe and the rituals. I don't just mean the actual pouring into the glass, the sugar and the spoon; I mean the evenings I share with my friends. The emptying of one bottle and the rebirth of the other. I could see they were beginning to draw conclusions from what I was telling them, and there was no progress to be made by doing that. I tried to divert their attention away from what I was sharing with them by donning another persona, and I think it worked. I was in the hospital for two years.

The salmon was cooked to perfection, and I prepared and arranged it on the plate. The asparagus was crisp and I left it next to the sauce so that people could have a choice, to pour or not to pour. I laughed aloud at that and tried out a few more Shakespearean cooking phrases. The chocolate tart had risen to the occasion and with the sauce for that next to it I thought the kitchen had a calm and serene atmosphere to it. Wine was chilling or warming as appropriate and so I turned to the dining area.

The apartment isn't large and so a small alcove at the side of the sitting room serves as a convenient dining area. A small table extends and easily seats the maximum six people I usually invite. Not the same six people, though some of them are my regular friends. It is usually a good mix, especially on a ritual evening, to have a couple of newcomers, or at least not regulars. The green cloth was decorated with small black stars; the star motif echoed by the candles and their holders. I lit the candles to fill the room with their scent. Cutlery was laid out, glasses placed next to place mats. I pressed 'play' on the CD player and muted classical music began to reverberate around the room. I think we were ready.

The first guest arrived between eight and nine. By five past nine we were all assembled. I had known most of the girls for several years; some I

had met at hospitals. Only one was a newcomer, met through a neighbourhood watch meeting.

Suzy was mid-twenties, very pretty, and worked as an illustrator for children's books. Her flat was filled with pictures and half started sketches of fairies, woodland scenes and unicorns, she liked unicorns.

We sampled the asparagus first, drunk with a light Chenin. As the girls helped me clear away the dishes, and we stacked them on the drainer by the sink, anticipation seemed to enter through the doors from the garden as though an uninvited guest had made an appearance.

Everyone assembled in the sitting room, and I brought in the bottle and the glasses on a wooden tray. Suzy was sitting between Val and Jenny; Val was softly whispering in Suzy's ear, while Jenny was stroking her leg, the skirt slipped up so that I could already see the stocking top. Wine over first course had relaxed everybody and a hand had been caressing my thigh from the second glass. Nicola and Jill had kissed as we stood from the table.

The spoon was coated in sugar six times and six times the green liquor was poured through it and into the ice filled glasses. Shrieks of delight were only slightly forced as the green turned milky white, streaked with emerald. The bottle was emptied with the last glass and exaggerated groans accompanied the theatrical tipping upside down demonstration of the bottle.

'That one's dead,' Jill shouted.

'Now to drink it's blood,' Val murmured and squeezed Suzy's shoulder.

I think she was becoming a little uncomfortable at this stage but Val knew what she was doing and sat away from her a little to prevent her feeling crowded. Jenny took the chance to move closer, and to allow her hand to slip under the skirt.

'A toast,' I announced as we all raised our glasses. 'To the lifting of the veil.'

'La Fee Verte.'

The absinthe was sipped, slowly at first, the essence coating our throats with a husky flavour. Then with more abandon, as glasses were drained and ice rattled emptily as if with regret as the final chords of the sensation flowed into her mouths.

I had been watching Suzy; she was quietly nervous at first, encouraged by Jenny's hand, approaching the drink as if it was something distasteful, as if allowing it to enter her was as obscene as if she was penetrated by a man. Gradually, as the hallucinogenic qualities began to tantalise her, I saw her visibly relax, even going so far as to pat Jill on the bottom.

I cleared away on my own as the others took their places at the table in readiness for the salmon. Served directly onto plates we all busied ourselves taking vegetables and sauces. More wine with this course, a Merlot, strange with fish I know but after the absinthe the juxtaposition of the flavours was invigorating.

My foot was fondling Nicola; quickly advancing along the stockinged leg to meet the warm, silk covered promise. Val was holding Suzy's breast through her blouse in one hand and spooning fish into her mouth with a fork held in the other. Jill had her dress pulled to her waist and her blue panties were no barrier to Jenny's fingers. The scent from the candles was now mixed with a musky scent of arousal and impending pleasure.

More clearing away, more wine, and the dessert course was met with roars of approval, and Suzy opening her blouse, disposing of her bra, and coating her nipples with the chocolate sauce. Chairs were knocked over in the rush to lick, but I merely smiled in the knowledge that this dessert was only the beginning.

Laughter was paramount, the chocolate tart consumed with delight and little finesse. Clothing was partially discarded as bodies, and what clothing was left, became messy with food, drink and kisses.

For coffee we left the table and moved into the sitting room where everyone pressed against the nearest body, stroking where they could, tasting what flesh they could reach. In the kitchen I made the coffee, and while I waited for it to brew I readied the bottle.

I unstopped my bottle and I swear as I took out the stopper and placed it on the work surface I heard distant whispers from inside. It was as though previous recipients were calling out to me. I strained to hear the voices, even going so far as to put the bottle to my ear. Then I got a bit frightened and I put it down quickly, bringing the recently purchased and now empty absinthe bottle and placing it next to my turbulent bottle. I could barely hear the whispers from inside my bottle but I was certain they were calling to me to stop. I didn't want to hear that message; they were unwelcome reminders of how it had all began.

I had left a little of the green liquid in the new bottle, and this I now let drip into my dry bottle. No more than four, possibly five drops fell from one bottle to the next but almost instantly my bottle was half full with an emerald green liquid more radiant than any absinthe than can be found today. As I watched, transfixed, as always, the level inside the bottle rose, and soon it was almost full to the brim; all but bursting for release. I placed the stopper back on it. As I did so, the new bottle cracked and shattered, the pieces spreading out over the dark green work surfaces and the kitchen floor. The coffee was ready; I could tidy things away later.

In the sitting room the atmosphere was sultry, yes, that's the right word. The windows were open and a cooling breeze was infiltrating from the darkened garden. I could hear the night sounds, some real but most perceived; a bat calling, an owl hunting, and other secret sounds that lived only in my imagination. Val and Nicola were kissing on the sofa, their hands clasped together as if in mutual prayer. Jill and Jenny had both removed their tops and the breasts that pressed together seemed as if they were rolling against each other like boats bobbing in a harbour. Suzy was sitting on the floor, alone, her head in her hands, chocolate still staining her fingers and shoulders, her skirt half pulled along her thighs.

All of them, apart from Suzy, looked up as I brought in the tray. There were mints and cheese with biscuits but I knew from the half closed eyes and hungry smiles that little of it would be eaten.

I knelt beside Suzy and whispered in her ear, letting my tongue play with the lobe. 'Are you all right?'

She nodded and fumbled for my hand. I squeezed hers and let my other hand roam over her left breast. The nipple was sticky but erect. She mumbled something deep in her throat but I couldn't hear what she was trying to say. I was very conscious of my own arousal, partly sexual of course, but mainly from the anticipation of the ritual, the secret part of the evening. It was almost

a solitary act but for the beginning I needed someone to assist. I needed the latest in a long line of Suzy's to provide the catalyst for the ceremony.

Some of the reason I was so conscious of my own arousal is the physical way my body is made. My clitoris is quite pronounced, standing out quite prominently from my vulva even when I am not excited. The vaginal lips are full, not hanging down because that sounds almost ugly, but *apparent*. The result is that they are constantly stimulated, my underwear moving sensuously against my sex throughout the day. I have tried going out without underwear but the sense of incompleteness is too much for my ordered mind to cope with. I tried it only last month, thinking I might have progressed enough to succeed, but after about ten minutes I had to run home. The whole day was spent speaking aloud the items in all the drawers of the house.

Jill made an effort to pour coffee but Jenny was moving her fingers too invitingly under her skirt for her to concentrate. Val and Nicola made no pretence at any interest in the tray. I took Suzy's hand and helped her to her feet.

My bottle was on the bedside table, lit from behind by the muted green lamp. The colours of the room were pale by comparison to the contents of the bottle and yet I knew with unbearable elation that the liquid within would soon be even more vivid, even more intoxicating.

Suzy needed no prompting to lie on the bed; in fact I think she flopped down on her own while I was still lighting the seventh candle. The other six had been burning for some time, lit at half hourly intervals during the evening.

I helped her slip off her blouse; the bra was long gone. She raised her bottom from the bed to allow me to undo and pull down her skirt. Smiling in her innocence she took the narrow waistband of her panties and pulled the material taught into her vagina, emphasising her mound.

She lifted up her arms to embrace me but I gently pushed them aside. I took the stopper from the bottle, laying it reverently onto the silver mat on the floor. I swear I heard a sigh escape from the bottle as the stopper came off, like a person loosening tight clothing might make, as a prisoner might utter before their last dawn.

Suzy struggled into a seated position, certain I was offering her a drink. In a way I was. I splashed three drops on top of her head, flicked two more on each breast, and pooled some into her navel. She laid back down anticipating some erotic play. The portion of liquid I poured into the ornate glass was carefully measured. At first I had needed a measuring cup to get the amount right but long experience meant I could judge it to perfection by hand and eye.

I put the glass to her lips and she closed her eyes. That added to the sense of occasion I thought. She sipped some of the special absinthe. It took a few seconds but then the scream she emitted filled the room. Her flesh burned and boiled where I had poured the drink onto her body. I emptied the rest of the glass into her open mouth and before she could think to swallow I covered her mouth with mine, drinking in the mixture of green fairy, of her saliva, of her fear and, eventually of her soul.

I ripped off my clothes and as she lay on the bed, twitching, I laid my body across hers and pressed us together. When she was still I transferred the contents of my mouth into the bottle. With the small pair of scissors I like to use I took some hair from her head and from her pubis and put them in the lip of the bottle. The stopper began to rock slowly on the silver tray on the floor.

Finally I scraped skin from her eyelids and when that was in the bottle I took the stopper, put it firmly in place, and shook the bottle savagely.

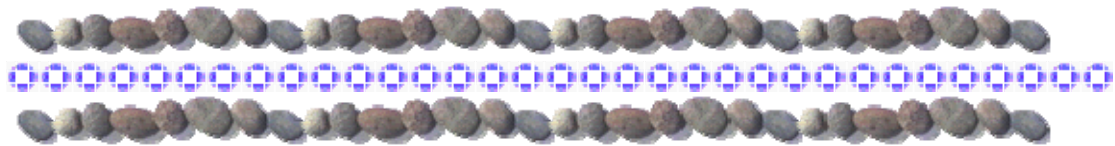
I could hear groans and sounds of eruption from the sitting room and knew that the shared part of the evening was drawing to a close. The liquid in the bottle was raging against the ancient glass sides, roaring with tidal fury, foaming with a passion that would be so intense I felt weak at the thought of the months of enjoyment ahead.

Another hour and the four girls were gone. They would assume Suzy would sleep over, and by the morning she would be gone. All gone.

My bottle was strongly anchored in its place in the kitchen. With the door to the garden open a wall of night black insinuated inside but with my immediate future safe I had no fear of the dark, no voices calling from inside me, no need to worry about what I had, where it was, no reason to worry at all.

Eventually the bottle would empty. Eventually a new bottle, a new evening with friends. Not for months yet, my supply would be used sparingly, but I knew that *eventually* I would need a new bottle of absinthe.

I couldn't visit Elvis again; he would likely be sacked before long anyway, but perhaps there was another shop somewhere, another step onto the slide.



See also

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