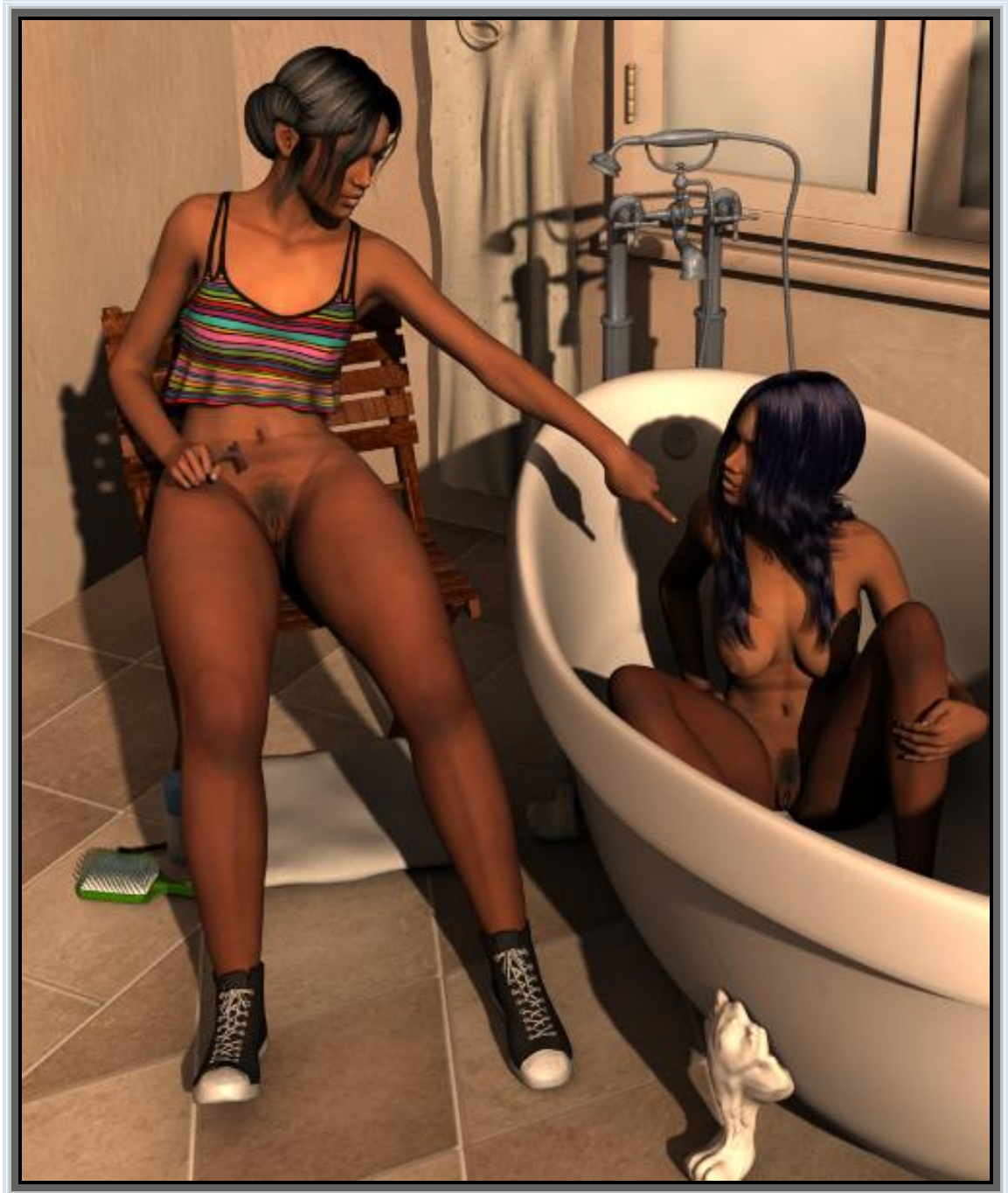


The Choice

Bradley Stoke



The cool nylon sheets clung to Layla's back and shoulders as underneath them she gently applied her tongue and lips to Marianne's oh! so very beautiful crotch. The folds of her vulva, the labias *minora* and *majora* as she remembered them being named in her Biology classes, and, most of all, that little button, the clitoris. Although she'd never studied her own clitoris with nearly as much attention as she now could Marianne's, she was sure hers wasn't quite as perfect. How could anyone's be? The "button of love" as she and Marianne christened it, but one so beautifully intricate and so delicious to lick with her tongue or nibble with her teeth.

Despite the two girls having been so passionate through the night, their periods of sleep interrupted again and again by the re-arousal of their mutual lust, Marianne was still easily stimulated. Her crotch twitched and trembled with passion, while a trail of Layla's saliva slid down the "tunnel of love" as the two girls had re-christened the vagina. Although Layla was under the sheet, it was thin enough to let through plenty of the early morning sunshine. Even without her glasses Layla could see the details of Marianne's crotch and that contrast between the darkness, the near ebony blackness, of her skin against the slightly golden, slightly brassy, brown of Marianne's equally firm young flesh.

She could hear, and almost feel, the sound of Marianne's pleasure. That gasp she loved, rising up and up from inside the very depths of her, sometimes exploding in a suppressed and delightful squeak and sometimes a more full-throated bestial cry. Oh! She loved Marianne so much! And what was better, Marianne said that she loved her too. Despite all the men she'd fucked, far more than the single (and singularly uninspiring) one that marked the totality of Layla's other sexual experience. But she was sure she could never miss having other lovers now she had Marianne. One who

was so like herself: slender, slim, smallish breasts and even the same slightly sharp chin. Of course, there was no way they could have both inherited that pointed chin, although who was to say what was in the ancestral mix of Marianne's muddled genes.

"Shit!" suddenly cried Marianne, mid-gasp. "Someone's at the door."

"That's only Mum," smiled Layla. She pulled herself up from under the sheets and wrapped an arm around her lover, pulling the sheet up to cover her nipples. Marianne sat next to her. The sheet was bundled onto her lap and her own small pointed nipples, still excited and stiff, stood out prominently on her bosom.

"Hello, dears!" announced Layla's mother, carrying in a tray with coffee, cereal and orange juice for two. "Don't forget you've got school today!"

She smiled at Marianne who warmly returned the smile. Layla was pleased that she and her mother got on so well. How would she have felt if the two people she loved most dearly in the world didn't get on? She shuddered at the thought.

"Thanks, Mum! We just got carried away!"

"I can see that, Lay! But remember your studies come first," Layla's mother commented. She regarded Marianne, perhaps too obviously evading her gaze from the needle scars on her long thin arms and the zits that still discoloured her brow after all those months since she'd come out of rehab. "What are you doing today, Marianne?"

Layla's lover scratched her cheek perhaps a little too vigorously. "I don't know, Mrs Lampton. I might go down the Job Centre. You know, look for a job."

"What happened to that other job, dear? The one in the fast food restaurant?"

"The Lunchbox? I turned up late one day, only an hour or so, and they sacked me. Just like that!"

"Well dear, that's what they're like with casual labour in these places. What

about going to college? Have you thought more about that?"

"Yes, Mrs Lampton," Marianne said, idly scratching one of the pale scab-like scars on her arm. "I thought about it. After you talked to me and all. I dunno. I wasn't too good at lessons and stuff when I was younger. But I'm thinking about it."

"Well, Layla dear," continued Mrs Lampton. "Eat your breakfast and I'll take you to school. But hurry! I don't want to be late for work. Like Marianne was."

Layla nodded. She liked it when her mother gave her a lift to school. So, she was doing a morning shift today at the clinic where she worked. She should have guessed from the fact that her mother was wearing her black nurse's outfit with the metal badge across her bosom.

Less than half an hour later, Layla and her mother had descended the stairwell of the council flats where they lived and were getting into the battered old Focus, which after all these years and all those miles was still reliable enough for Mrs Lampton. Not that she could easily afford a replacement. Layla kissed Marianne goodbye, but couldn't resist a tighter hug and a more slobbery kiss while her mother watched with an indulgent smile. And then mother and daughter were in the car, as Layla's lover strode away in her battered denim shorts and that top that showed off her navel-ring to its very best advantage, her shoulder bag slung over her shoulder.

"Oh! I love her so much!" exclaimed Layla, watching her lover recede from sight in the rear-view mirror.

"I know, dear!" grinned her mother. "I could hear you all night!"

Layla blushed, her skin turning an even darker colour. "You heard? We didn't make that much noise, did we?"

Her mother nodded. "Ours is a pretty small flat. But it's love, Lay. I'm happy

for you. I'm sure I was just the same when I was your age. Only, of course, not with another girl. You and Marianne make a lovely couple."

"Oh! Mum!" said Layla with glee. "I love you too! After Marianne, you're the most important thing in my life!"

"But what about your exams, Lay sweetheart. You don't want to end up working in the Lunchbox like Marianne, do you? You've got to concentrate on them. Especially if you want to go on to Medical school so much."

"I know. I know," sighed Layla sadly, nervously adjusting her wire-framed spectacles. "I've got to study. I know I have to."

"You've done so well, so far. So very well. Soon you'll be leaving the Leamington Heights Flats and go off with that scholarship that's just a few exams away. You don't want to jeopardise that. And if you love your old mother, *please* don't risk it. I'd hate to see you not do as well as you ought."

"I know, Mum!" sighed Layla. "You're really talking about Marianne, aren't you? I've got to see less of her until my exams are over, haven't I?"

"Well, dear," nodded her mother. "I know you're both very much in love. But she's not got examinations to do like you. I'm sure you can hold out a month or so till your studies are over. You don't want her to think she ruined your future for you."

"Oh Mum!"

Layla could see the school coming into sight. A large block, partly Victorian and partly, and rather dilapidated, more recent brutalist architecture. Not the most revered educational establishment, but Layla was almost the star pupil and her fellow students were *so* supportive of her. She couldn't let down them. Or her mother. She gripped her satchel tightly to her corduroy lap and brushed some dust off her cotton

sweatshirt.

“I’ll never let you down, Mum! Never! I love you. I’ll tell Marianne we’re not to see each other until after it’s all over. I’m sure she’ll understand!”

“I hope so,” Layla’s mother agreed. “I certainly hope so.”

Unfortunately, Marianne wasn’t quite as understanding as mother and daughter had hoped. In fact, Layla’s mother probably had the more realistic view when she stressed to her daughter just how difficult it might be to persuade her.

“Given her background, you know. It’s not as if she’s had a mother who’s supported her like I have you. It could be a tough call,” she advised her daughter.

“What! A whole fucking month!” exclaimed Marianne angrily when she was told. “A whole fucking fucking month?”

“And then it’ll be over, Mari dearest! Than we can spend all our time together. Morning, afternoon, everything!”

“But till then I can’t stop over. We can only kiss and only a little bit. I’ll fucking die. I love you, Lay! I fucking love you! I can’t be fucking fucking ...”

Layla could see real tears of anger and frustration in her lover’s eyes. She was so close to relenting. To see what she could do. Find some way they could continue to spend every night together. But she remembered her mother. And not just her mother. Only yesterday, the Maths teacher, Miss Anderton, had said she was probably the brightest student she’d ever had and was certain she’d get that scholarship she was hoping for. Straight As were just not going to be a problem for her.

“I’ve got to, Mari. It’s important. We’ll be together after the exams. It’s not long!”

“But what am I to do? I live in a fucking squat you know. Full of junkies and

crackheads and tarts and the like. I've just got a fucking mattress to sleep on. And it's not easy for me, either. I still want smack and stuff. You know, fags, booze and blow just ain't enough when you're coming off."

"I know. I know."

"I'm a fucking mess, Lay. You're the only fucking thing in my life that holds me together."

"I know. I know. But I love you, Mari. You've got to believe me. Just a month or so. You managed before me. You can manage a little longer."

Marianne kissed Layla tenderly on the lips, wiping the tear from her cheek.

"Oh! Layla. It's only 'cos I love you so much! Okay! Okay! You're right! I can do it. It'll be fucking hard. But I can do it. 'Slong as we stay together tonight. I'm sure there's a few things we haven't tried out!"

Layla sniffed and brushed the back of her hand across her eyes. "I don't believe that's possible!" she said with a sad laugh, happy that Marianne seemed to have come round to seeing sense.

The following morning left Layla feeling wretched and guilty as she kissed Marianne's lips one last time until the exams were over. She was inconsolable as her mother drove her to school, her face a vision of misery, her spectacles fogged by tears and her fingernails digging deep inside the stiff fabric of her satchel. Her mother was silent all the way, perhaps knowing there was nothing she could say that could at all comfort her lovesick daughter. Even their lovemaking during the night had had an air of desperation about it. Whatever new thing it was that Marianne might have introduced to their love life was forgotten as the two girls cuddled each other tight and explored the favourite parts of each other's bodies for the last time. At least for now.

But Layla was wrong if she thought it would be as easy as that.

Two days later, she was sitting on the chair where she stood her spectacles at night. Her desk was wedged tightly against the bed with exercise and text books faced open. The angle-poise lamp her mother had bought in a car boot sale was shining on an illustration of a dissected rabbit and cast its shadow on a poster of a black four-girl R&B group.

Layla's attention was suddenly taken by a familiar tring on her mobile. It was the special tune she'd chosen for Marianne. The one the two of them had spent ages choosing on the Internet until they found the tune whose lyrics best captured the love they felt for each other.

Layla picked up the phone instantly. "Hi!"

She was disappointed to hear nothing much on the other end. Some kind of grunting breathing noise. Nothing. "Hello! Hello! Is that you, Mari?" She was about to put the phone down with disappointment when she heard Marianne's voice, but it sounded distant and not really addressed to her.

"It's in, is it? All the fucking way in?"

"Is that you, Marianne?" Layla asked. And what was that strange man's voice that seemed to be saying "Yeah!" in the background.

And then Layla heard Marianne's voice more loudly. "That you, Lay? Just phoning to tell you I'm fucking Dave. That's your fucking name, isn't it? No. Sorry. Gav. I'm fucking Gav. Or he's fucking me. You wanna hear it?"

Layla flushed. "No! No! I don't want to hear!"

"Well! You're fucking going to!"

And then Layla heard strange sounds that could have been anything, but were probably the sound of a penis thrusting in and out of Marianne's sweet vagina, the

one that had been promised to only her.

“Oh! Fucking stop that shit!” suddenly came a loud man’s voice. And the phone went dead.

A few hours later, after Layla had at last regained her composure and was able once more to concentrate on the intricacies of mathematical integration, the phone rang again.

“I just fucked Don!” came Marianne’s voice as soon as Layla had spoken.

“I thought you said it was Gav?” queried Layla. Was this proof that Marianne was lying?

“That was earlier. I just done Don. He’s fucking lush. And you know what, Lay?”

Layla made no answer. What was Marianne doing to her?

“Lay? You can fucking hear me. You know what? “

“No, I don’t,” said Layla, feeling quite angry now.

“He fucked me up the arse.”

“He did what?”

“Up the fucking arse!”

Despite herself, Layla’s nascent medical conscience clicked into place. “I hope he used a condom. For his sake.”

“No fucking rubbers here, Lay!” laughed Marianne. “We done the whole lot. Fucking spunk everywhere.”

“But... You know... It’s not as if...”

“Relax, Lay! He’s positive and all. I’m not that bad. I don’t want everyone to get what I’ve got.”

“What are you doing, Mari? Why are you doing this? Why are you calling me? Why are you fucking with all these... these... boys?”

The phone was quiet. Layla wondered whether Marianne was still there. And then she heard a rather loud sob. A heartbreaking guttural sob that came from deep deep within Marianne’s chest.

“I fucking love you, Lay. I just fucking miss you!”

And then the phone clicked off.

There were no more calls the rest of the evening. And none the following day. And then, Friday night, when there was still no respite from study for Layla, but the night that was a special night for Marianne and her as it was a Friday they first kissed. Indeed, it was a Friday night they’d first met when Marianne had been invited to the same teenage party as Layla and the two had got chatting over a can of cheap lager. And just didn’t stop chatting. And somehow both of them had known there was something special going on between them. It was a Friday when a very tearful Marianne phoned up again.

And then for half an hour or more she went on and on and on about how much she loved and missed Layla, while her black lover got through one paper hanky after another as she wept over Marianne’s plight.

And then Marianne paused.

“What is it, Mari?”

“I fucking shot up again last night!”

Layla gasped. “You said you’d kicked the stuff.”

“Well, it’s difficult. And anyway it was just going round. It’s not as if I had to fucking nick something to pay for it. ‘Sno big deal!”

“But was the needle sterilised?”

Marianne laughed in a hollow empty way. “What fucking difference would that make now?”

There was an uneasy pause on the mobile. And then Marianne coughed.

“Well, what I really phoned up to say, you know, what I meant to say was, it’s stupid I know, but just don’t fucking look at any mail you get tomorrow.”

“What d’you mean?”

“I was fucking high. It was stupid. And it weren’t fucking smack. It was before that. Bit of charlie. Bit of sulphate. Loads of booze. You know. I was fucking mingo!”

“What mail?”

“Just don’t fucking look at it, right!”

And then the phone went dead.

Of course, when the post landed on the mat in the tiny hallway that led to the two bedrooms and the cramped living room, there was nothing in the world that would have stopped Layla from rushing with it to her bedroom to see what had arrived. Thankfully, her mother was doing weekends again for the extra cash, so she wouldn’t see whatever it was that was in the envelope scrawled over in Marianne’s huge poorly educated hand.

And when Layla opened the envelope she was even more pleased her mother wasn’t in. There were a number of digital camera shots all featuring Marianne, none of them remotely artistically composed and all fairly unambiguous. There was a picture of an erect penis halfway up (and Layla had to squint quite hard) what could only be Marianne’s anus from that angle. And two pictures of her with her face

covered in a gooey sticky mess that certainly looked like what Layla thought semen should look like. And a picture of a fat, grotesque, shiny penis hovering just over the thick bushy mass of Marianne's crotch. And Layla knew it could only be Marianne's. That small crude tattoo and the sheer hairiness of it could only belong to her. And the penis had a kind of pinkish, creamy, clear tear dripping out of the tip of its fat purplish glans. At least none of the men whose bits of anatomy she could see were black. That would be an act of treachery just a little too close to home after all Marianne had said about how much she loved Layla's very skin colour.

When Layla's mother came home from work several hours later, she found her daughter still sitting on the sofa in the living room. Around her were scattered the obscene photographs and used damp paper tissues. She put a motherly arm around her daughter's shoulder and listened patiently and with affection as Layla recounted how badly Marianne was taking her enforced separation from her lover. She nodded sympathetically and wiped away the tears that still ran down Layla's cheeks and dampened her tee shirt.

"Well, one thing's for sure," Layla's mother announced, "and that is that this just can't go on like this!"

"But what are we going to do?" sobbed Layla. "It's not just she's having... having... making love... with these men... it's that she's started taking drugs again. I'm terrified she'll kill herself. She got pretty close to that once she told me."

"Yes," agreed Mrs Lampton. "I can see those scars on her wrist. But she's not really the suicidal type, you know. When she did that, she was really very desperate indeed. But she's not coping well at all with not seeing you, is she? And what's worse, as far as I'm concerned, is what she's doing to you."

Layla sighed. "I do so love her. And I know that when she lets those boys... well... you can see the photos... it's not what she really feels..."

"Don't worry! I know exactly what she's doing. And you're a clever girl. You can see it just as much as I can. She's just trying to make you feel bad. It's not difficult for a girl like her to find a man who'll... who will... do things like that. What she knows. And what you know. And what everyone knows. Is that it's much more difficult for a girl like her, from her junkie background, surrounded by prostitution, vice, drugs and petty crime, what's most difficult for her is finding someone as perfect as you, my darling daughter."

"I don't love her because I feel sorry for her, Mum. I loved her before I knew she'd got... well, not actually got, but could get... full-blown... Or the drugs. Or her time in care. Or when she used to sell her body for heroin. That's not the Marianne I love. She's just a really beautiful, truly wonderful..."

"I know. I know," said Layla's mother. "Well, this can't go on. It's affecting your studies for a start. I know the address of the squat she's staying at. I'm going to go there this very minute and have it out with her. And if she's not there... Well! I'll just sit on the doorstep until she comes home. And if that's not till tomorrow morning, I don't care. It's got to be done. I love you too much, Lay, to let your girlfriend ruin your life through her jealous temper tantrums!"

Layla nodded her head and watched her mother change into her more casual clothes. She continued to sit on the sofa for another half an hour after she heard the front door close and her mother leave. Then, at last, perhaps just as a result of having shared the burden of her woes with someone else, she felt able to return to her studies. She needed to be sure she really understood exactly how the valency of carbohydrates

differed from other organic molecules.

It was very late indeed when Layla's mother returned home. After midnight in fact. Layla was frightened to go to bed. She wanted so much to hear what her mother had said to Marianne. She'd long since finished her studies, where she'd somehow got comfort from the very abstract nature of the discipline, and was half watching and half not watching some late night film where the black hero had managed to single-handedly save the entire city of New York from destruction, even though his rather stupid white sidekick got equal billing in the television listings.

"You still up, dear!" her mother shouted.

"Yes, Mum!" said Layla pushing open the door to the living room and looking into the hallway. And she could see there wasn't just her mother there, but also, and surrounded by plastic bags and an extremely battered suitcase, was Marianne. She looked strangely shy and sheepish and smiled at Layla in a very weak way. "Mari! Why? What? I thought..."

"Leave the bags in the hall, Marianne dear. Let's go into the living room. And then we'll discuss what's going to be the way from now on."

And so Layla sat on the floor, one leg stretched out and the other beneath her, while Marianne sat on one chair and her mother held court on the sofa. Marianne had a packet of cigarettes and occasionally dipped in for a smoke, and Layla noticed that, for the first time, her mother did not object to there being smoke in the house.

When Mrs Lampton had arrived at the squat, Marianne was indeed not in. But the other people in the house, a tall Iranian guy and his rather fat girlfriend, admitted her in and fed her cups of coffee while she waited for Marianne to return. They offered her some grass, but although Layla's mother had no objection to the drug, -

she'd smoked plenty when she was younger, - she didn't want it to cloud her mind. Eventually, it must have been about seven, Marianne returned home. She was by herself and looked really dreadful. In fact, almost the first thing Layla's mother did when she saw Marianne was rush her off to the bathroom and wash her.

Her clothes smelt of vomit, she had dirt over her face, her hair was tangled with some disgusting oily muck, and she was still pretty high from whatever she'd been taking.

“Cocktail!” Marianne clarified unhelpfully.

At last, she and Layla's mother had got talking. And talking. And eventually it was all decided. Clearly the two girls just couldn't live apart. It simply wasn't working. Marianne was falling apart and sliding back into her old ways. And Layla was worrying herself to death about her lover. So, the obvious solution was for Marianne to move permanently into the flat with Layla and her mother.

“But what about my studies?”

Well, obviously Marianne had a choice. She could either continue to live in squalor and almost certainly die fairly soon from some illness exacerbated by her... her condition. Or she could abide by the rules of the house. And really there was only one rule, apart from not taking drugs, - and Marianne could continue to smoke cigarettes for a while if it helped her get off hard drugs, - and that was that Layla should continue in her studies. Without interruption. It was more important than perhaps either girl really appreciated that Layla should pass her exams and go on to pursue a career as a doctor or whatever she might eventually decide to be. It was the way out of the life of poverty that was all any of them had ever known till now. Of course, the girls could continue to sleep together. But it would be appreciated if they

made an effort to keep the noise down.

“It’s not just me, sweetheart. Although these walls are paper-thin. It’s the neighbours too. You’re both *very* vocal lovers, you know!”

And that was that. Marianne had been offered the choice. And she took it. More because of her love for Layla than anything else.

And although Marianne clearly benefited from the security and comfort of a warm council flat and the attentive caresses of her lover, no one benefited more than Layla who, with the assistance of the two people she loved more than anyone else in the world, studied especially hard for her exams and did even better than her teachers had expected.