

Fiction

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother

By Harlan Ellison



fictionwise *contemporary*

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison



Fictionwise Publications

www.fictionwise.com

This ebook is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright ©1988 The Kilimanjaro Corporation. All rights reserved.

NOTICE: This ebook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means to a person other than the original purchaser is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to fines and/or imprisonment. Fictionwise Publications offers a \$500 reward to anyone who provides information leading to the conviction of a person infringing on any Fictionwise ebook copyright.

COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

This ebook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

This morning I woke to the infinitely sweet, yet lonely sound of *Claire de Lune* coming to me through closed windows, upstairs in a high-ceilinged suite of this century-old hotel; in a land that is not my own. I lay in bed and at first thought I was still in the dream: it was so ethereal and melancholy. Then I heard Camilla stir, where she lay wrapped in blankets on the floor, and I knew the dream was past. The bed had been too soft for her, an old fluffy mattress with a gully down the middle. She had chosen to sleep beyond the foot of the bed.

I lay there and listened to the music, trying to snare just a wisp, even a scintilla, of the dream. It was the memory of something I was certain I'd lost among the ruins of the years that lay strewn behind me. Years in which Camilla and I had fled from place to place, neither citizens of a certain land nor citizens of the world: simply refugees whose most

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

prominent baggage was fear. Years that bore our footprints on their every hour. Years like a pale golden desert stretching back and back, on the side of me that has no eyes; a desert in which lay items from my life's rucksack: items that I had jettisoned so I could continue walking. Because there was no possibility of ending the flight.

I had untied those items and dropped them to lighten my load, because the flight had grown ever more arduous: the walking through years ... the caretakership of the woman I loved.

Like a wanderer without water, or a soldier separated from his companions, I moved forward with her minute by minute, discarding casual acquaintances and toys I had outgrown; names and faces of people with whom we had briefly traveled; the taste of candy no longer manufactured and songs no longer sung; books I had read simply because they had been at hand when there was time to be filled waiting for a train; all dropped in the shifting sand and quickly covered by time, and all that I retained, all that sustained me, was this love we shared, and the fear we shared.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

As far as the eye could see, on that side of me without eyes, empty vessels and odd items of clothing lay vanishing in the golden sand, marking our passage, Camilla's and mine.

And one of those memories I had once held dear bore resonance with the strains of Debussy floating up to me in the cool ambiance of the nascent morning. I lay there in the old bed's gully, Camilla stirring on her pallet, and tried to remember what I wanted to reclaim from the desert. But without eyes on that side facing toward yesterday, looking out across the golden sands of all those years ... I could not call it back.

It was the music no one was playing that I had heard at Stonehenge, ten years ago. It was the sound of the pan pipes at Hanging Rock thirteen years ago, and the notes of a flute from the other side of the Valley of the Stonebow eight years ago. I had heard that recollection in a cave in the foothills overlooking the Fairchild Desert and, once, I heard it drifting through a misty downpour in the Sikkim rainforest.

The dream abandoned, I have never been able to unearth the greater substance of that memory. And each time it floats back to me—like the remembrance of an aunt I had adored, who died long long ago, with me

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

again for just an instant in the sweet scent of perfume worn by a passing woman on a city street—I am filled with a sense of loss and helplessness. And not even Camilla can damp the sorrow.

I lay there, knowing it was no dream, weak and without resources, dreading the day to come, afraid to leave the safe gully of the bed, once more to shoulder the remaining gear of my life; for another terrible day in the endless flight.

Then *Clair de Lune* was interrupted by three warm, mellifluous tones—B, F Sharp, D Sharp—and, distantly, as if rising from within a crystal palace in a lost city on a sunken continent, I heard a woman's voice announcing the departure of a train to Edinburgh; resonating through the domed vastness of Glasgow's Central Station; drifting up to me in my bed in the Central Hotel built above the terminal; the murky glass dome lying just two storeys below my window; forming a postcard depiction of the Great Bubble of the Capital City of Lost Atlantis. If such a place ever existed, it would have looked that way. And if it had ever existed, it could have had no more magical presence than through the strains of Debussy.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

Clair de Lune resumed, I sighed, threw back the covers, swung my feet out onto the cold floor, and resumed the walk that was a flight that was the remainder of my time that was my life, on the desert littered with my past.

I tried not to think about what might happen today, and went to the walk-in clothes closet, and took down the brown satchel with the flensing equipment in it. Then I selected something slim and sharp, and dutifully scraped the encrusted material that had accumulated during the night, off the body of the woman I loved.

Out there in Atlantis, *Clair de Lune* died away.

* * * *

One would think history could never forget them. Sawney and all the rest of them. But not even the great library in Edinburgh had more than vague and cursory references. Nothing in Christie's history of Scotland, nothing in Sharp or Frankfort. A mere thirty-eight words in Donaldson and Morpeth's *A Dictionary of Scottish History*. The library in Enid, Oklahoma,

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

where I was born and raised till I ran off to find my fortune, would have had nothing. I could in no way have been alerted.

One would think such things too terrible to be forgotten. But I understand there are college students all over the world these days for whom the words Dachau and Buchenwald and Belsen have no meaning.

In such a world, I'm grateful to have found love to sustain me.

* * * *

We drove the rental car south out of Glasgow on 77. It was barely eight o'clock. We wanted an early start, though Ballantrae was less than seventy miles; 111.021 kilometers, to be precise. The southwest seacoast. Galloway.

We discussed settling down here: Portpatrick, Glen App, or Cairnryan; perhaps take a freehold on a crofter's cottage near Castle Kennedy; or even nearer Bennane Head, possibly on the sheltered southern shore of

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

Loch Ryan. But the councils weren't sanctioning freeholds for Americans, and Camilla had no birth certificate proving she was of Scottish birth, of course. So we had come to visit, at last. After all the years Camilla had begged me for this hometurning in our flight, we passed through Milnarnock, and reached the Firth of Clyde at Prestwick, just as the rain began sweeping the coast. After all those years, it was an unpleasant omen. And my trepidation about returning Camilla to her ancestral environs deepened. But she had implored me so heartbreakingly.

We drove the short distance to Ayr and cut over to 719 that trailed deeper south right along the coastline; it was perhaps an hour, then, to travel the thirty-five miles to Ballantrae, the rain barely increasing in intensity, though the sky blended in gray metal with the water of the North Channel. Sheet metal from top to bottom, and we sloughing along the extruded wetness of the road that edged the moors.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

Camilla did not speak, had not spoken since we'd passed Dunure; but she had her face pressed to the window, looking out at the dismal machinery of leaden scenery, leaving for an instant four halations of breath fog on the glass before turning to stare ahead through the windshield. Her breath rasped and puffs of exhalation warned me she was getting too cold. I pulled over and took a blanket from the back seat, and wrapped her more securely. She smiled and mewled softly.

I scratched the nape of her neck, said, "Soon," and turned back onto the road and kept going.

We reached Ballantrae before noon, and Camilla decided to wait in the car while I went to get a bite to eat. I told her I'd bring something back, and she leaned across and kissed me, and smiled, and moved her head in that sweet sidewise way that I adored. "Haggis?" I said, teasing her. She hated haggis. She gave me a look, and I quickly said, "I'm kidding, I'm

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

just kidding," before she cuffed me a good one. "Howzabout some eggs?" That brought back the smile.

I didn't feel like going into the rental's boot for a bowl ... everything was packed tightly. So after I found Wimpy's and choked down three burgers, I cruised till I found a Woolworth's and laid out three quid for an aluminum mixing bowl. There was a delay in the checkout line, with an old woman in a snood raising such a fuss about something or other that the teen-age cashier had to call the manager. And everyone stood in line, more or less embarrassed by the whole thing, till they stopped shouting and the manager took the old woman off upstairs to his office to sort things out. I was impressed at how kindly he treated her, after all the ruckus. He seemed a nice man, and I felt sorry for the old woman, who looked widowed, cast alone, and hopeless. It made me sad for a moment, but the line moved quickly and I paid for the bowl and went back out into the slanting rain.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

There was a grocer's on the way back to the public parking lot where I'd left the little Vauxhall Cavalier, and I waited in another short queue to pay for a half dozen free-range eggs carefully placed in a paper bag by an overweight, ruddy-faced man who carried on a running diatribe with his wife, at the rear of the shop, about how he would absolutely *not* carry Mrs. Bassandyne's box of groceries out to her car, no matter *how* many times she imperiously honked her horn. His wife looked like a typical telly version of a little old mum, and she agreed with him that Mrs. Bassandyne was indeed a right miserable cow. He managed to thank me for my purchase, in the middle of a Bassandyne sentence, and I went out again into the rain, which had grown heavier.

Camilla wasn't in the car.

The rain had soaked through the shoulders of my mac, and every time I took a step my feet sqooshed in my wellies. The door of the rental was unlocked, and I put the bag of eggs on the front seat. Camilla was

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

nowhere in sight, and I was an amputated leg. At first distressed, then troubled, then quickly frightened, I began running up and down the rows of parked cars. All I found was casual litter, a penny lying face-up in an oil slick, and the bones of what had probably been a small dog; very white and clean, with the marks of tiny teeth all over them.

When finally I circled back to the Vauxhall, Camilla was there, standing in the rain, the soaking blanket around her. I hustled her into the car, went around and, dripping wet, climbed in. She looked at me mischievously, and apologized for having taken so long. "There was a line at the Woolworth's and the grocer's," I said. "Are you hungry?"

She told me she was hungry, but she said it with that subtext of tone that reprimanded me for having kept her waiting. I pulled the aluminum bowl out of the deep pocket of my mac, and broke the eggs into it. I put it on the lowered ledge of the opened glove compartment, and she went

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

right to it. I watched in silence, determined not to ask her why she had wandered off into the storm.

When we drove out of the parking lot, a sizzle of lightning illuminated the delicate calligraphy of dog bones that still lay between a Ford Escort and a Mazda.

We left 77 just south of Ballantrae and took a weary, flooded dirt road out along the cliffs above Bennane Head. I could not contain my growing fear, and Camilla's reassuring smile only made me dwell more darkly on the ivory luster of bone in water.

* * * *

Fame and fortune always eluded me. I laugh when I think how *completely* they had eluded me. I never had a clue. Not the smallest indication how to go about sinking roots, or making money, or bettering myself, or taking hold. There are people—well, I suppose almost *all*

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

people, really—who manage to do it. They find mates, they get jobs, they buy homes, they have children, they furnish apartments, they get an education, they learn the ins and outs of electrical wiring or plastering or office temp, and they make lives for themselves.

I never knew how to do any of that. I couldn't talk to people, I was afraid of women. I never went into a restaurant or bookstore where anyone recognized me a second time. It was just the road, always the road, from here to there, and on again to someplace else. And no one place was even the tiniest bit better than the place I had just left. I was cold as an ice bucket, and had strong legs for walking. A job here, a job there, and I never became good enough at anything for an employer to suggest that I might, to our mutual advantage, stay on, settle down, take a position.

I went everywhere. All over Europe, the Greek isles, Hungary and even those parts of the Balkans that are no longer called Transylvania or

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

Barnsdorf or Moldavia; Algeria, India, all over the subcontinent; Pakistan, Israel, Zaire, the Congo. I shipped aboard tramp steamers to the China Sea, to Sumatra, as far north as Kiska and Attu, as far south as Brazil, Argentina. I saw Patagonia. I saw gauchos. In another place I saw penguins. I shipped there and back, and never once made a friend who lasted beyond the time at sea.

No one disliked me, no one very much interfered with me, they just didn't take much notice of me. I followed instructions to the letter, but managed to stay away from bad companions or trouble. I just went where the waves hit the shore, and stayed a time, and then moved on.

But I never returned to America, and I suppose all my family is gone now. I never had it in me to return to Enid, Oklahoma: I mean to say, that's where I'd run *away* from, why would I go back?

Fifteen years ago, I found Camilla. We fell in love. I thought I wanted to say something about that, how we came to be together, the time we've

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

spent together since. But I don't want to go into that. It isn't something everyone would understand. I know it isn't enough to say that we just love each other, and need to be together, because anyone could say the same thing. But if I know one truth about people, it is that everyone judges everyone else. People they never met, and only read about in a newspaper or saw on a telly, they decide this or that about them ... this is a good guy, and that's a sick and weird guy, or this woman is no good and that woman is above her station. It isn't fair. You just can't know why people do the things they do; and if you try to be a good guy, and go out of your way not to hurt anyone, then other people simply ought to let you be.

For instance, and I don't mean this to be smutty, but it's just exactly what I'm talking about, a long time ago I was in Uppsala, Sweden. I was given some magazines full of naked men and women, by a student I met who attended the University there. One of them was full of photographs of a woman having sex with animals. When I first saw it, I was very

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

upset. I'd never seen anything like that. The woman was pretty, and the pictures had been taken on a farm somewhere, I suppose in Sweden, because the bull she was with had ice all matted in his hair. And she was doing things with a pig.

And I was so upset that I sought him out, the student who had given me the magazines, and I gave that one back to him, and I told him I couldn't understand how a woman could do such things. And he told me this young woman was very famous, that she was a simple farm girl, and that she truly loved animals, and didn't think there was anything awful about making the animals she loved happy. So I sat and studied that magazine, with that pretty young woman making love to the bull and the pig, and after a while I could see that she was really smiling, and the animals seemed to be content: and after a while longer it wasn't dirty to me any more. It was just as if she were petting a rabbit or hugging a kitten.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

I didn't see the ugliness others saw. I came to understand that there is little enough affection in the world and, even if everyone finds it necessary to pass judgments that this is proper, and that is obscene, that *this* young woman, even if she was of what they call diminished capacity, even she was better than those who passed judgements, because she loved the animals, and she wasn't hurting anyone, and if that was how she chose to show her love, it was okay.

But try to explain that to most people, and see how their faces screw up as if they'd eaten something sour. And so, if you take my point, that's why I don't want to talk about how I met Camilla in Wales, and what she was doing there, and how we got together, and how we came to find love together.

I'll just say this: she didn't want to be there, and her lot was not a happy one, and I got her away from there, and we started running, and besides being in love, she is the first and only person who ever *needed me*.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

And that account for a lot. So after fifteen years of her asking me to take her to Galloway, I agreed, and it was a long, hard journey, but I'd taken her home.

Why was it she would tell me anything, had always shared everything with me, but would fall silent when I'd ask her how long it had been since she had seen her family, how long she had been away from her home?

And where in the world could they live, out here at the edge of Scotland, in this desolate place of cliffs and caves and moors? What could people farm out here, to sustain a decent life?

* * * *

We parked at the edge of the cliffs, and I suggested we wait in the car till the rain had abated. Camilla was veiled in her manner, and tried not to seem anxious. But after a few minutes she wanted to get out, and she managed the door handle, and went down into the rain. I jumped out and

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

came around, and helped her up. She stood there, her head tilted toward the heavens, the pounding rain sleeking her, running off both of us. Then she went to the edge of the cliff and tried to find a way down to the sea. "No!" I yelled across the thunder and darkness. "There's no way down!"

She went low and tried to crawl over the edge, grasping the tenacious twist of a briar bush. I slipped trying to get to her, and went face-first into the running mud where the road met the flattened grass. When I tried to rise, I slipped again. Then I just crawled toward her, as she tried to lower herself down the cliff. "Camilla! No! What're you doing? Stop, this's crazy ... stop!" It was lunacy, a sheer drop nearly six hundred feet into the Channel, the storm skirling across the cliff-edge, the rain flooding the ground and waterfaling over the rim. I couldn't believe what she was trying to do. Where was she going?

I managed to grab her under the shoulders, and I rolled sidewise, digging my wellies into the mud and loam, making a dam against the

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

water with my body. Then I started scrabbling backward, pulling her with me. She screamed and raked me.

I kept pulling, she was trying desperately to get away from me. I lost purchase as one of my feet slid across the mud, she got loose, crawled away, I reached back and snagged her clothing with one hand, I held on and wrenched back as hard as I could, she rolled onto her back, and I dragged her through the vicious downpour as darkness now fell utterly, dissolving sky, sea, cliff, land, everything. Only once, in the sulfurous whitelight of a blast of lightning close to the cliff, could I see Camilla's eyes. It wasn't the woman I'd loved for fifteen years, it was a mud-swathed creature possessed by a madness to go over the edge. Had she been trying for a decade and a half to return to this place only to kill herself? A lemming seeking oblivion? Had her life before my coming, or since I had joined with her, been so awful that all she wanted was to die? I fought against it. I fought against *her*, and finally ... I won.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

I rolled us over and over and over, back toward the road, away from the cliff edge, and at last came to rest against the side of the car. I held her close and cradled her, and she spat and raged and tried to break loose.

“No, Camilla ... no, please, stop ... honey, please...”

After a time, there in the cascading darkness, she went limp. And after a greater time she let me know she would not try that route again. But she kept saying she needed to go home.

I knew, then, that there was no lonely farmhouse out here. There might not even be family, as there might not be family in Enid, Oklahoma. But she had the need to find them, wherever they were out here; and I had to help her.

I loved her. That is all there is to say.

When I was certain she would not try for the edge again, I let her go. She rested a moment, then rose and moved slowly away, across the road, away from the cliff and the sea. Out across the moors. Without a

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

word, she made her painful, laborious passage through the gorse, the silvery gray tufts of grass now bending beneath the hammering rain, the craggy rocks black and crippled-seeming leaping out for an instant as lightning illuminated them, then vanishing into blind emptiness as night rushed back in around the image. For a moment she vanished as she moved through a stand of tall reedlike grass, then she was limned against the sky as she crawled over a rock outcrop. I followed, at a short distance, as an observer would track a great terrapin trying to find its way to the sea.

She seemed to know what she was looking for. And I had bright instants of hope that there would be, if not a lonely farmhouse, then the burned-out wreckage of a farmhouse that had been here long ago, before Camilla had left.

But finally, she came to an enormous pile of rocks all grown over with briar bushes, thick with thorns. She climbed the cairn, and I followed;

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

and found her trying to dig away the sharp spikey branches. She was already bleeding when I got there.

I tried to stop her, but again, she was possessed. She *had* to pull away those bushes.

I gently edged her aside and, wrapping the cuffs of my mac around my hands, I strained and wrenched at the bushes where she indicated. After a fearful struggle, they came out of the niches in the rocks, one by one.

The first clot of dirt surrounding the tenacious root-systems brought up a filthy skull. It was a human skull. I thought for a moment it was an animal skull, but when the rain washed it clean, I saw that it was not an animal. It had been human. How long ago it had been human, I could not tell. When I stopped digging, she moved to take over; but I nudged her back, and went at it again.

It seemed hours, just wrenching and digging in the spaces between the black rocks of the cairn. Hours in the slashing storm. Hours and eternities

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

without time or sense. And at last, my hand slipped through into a cool empty place between the rocks.

“There's a hole here ... I think, there seems to be, I think there's a large hole under here...”

She joined me again, and I couldn't stop her or slow her. She dug madly, like a beast uncovering a meal hidden for later attention.

I wedged myself against the larger of two leaning rocks in the mound, and braced my feet against the smaller, and steadily pushed. I have strong legs, as I said. The rock crunched, trembled, moved restlessly like a fat man in sleep, and then overbalanced in its setting, and fell away, tumbling quickly out of sight down the slope of the cairn.

As lightning blasted the landscape, I saw the entrance to the cave. The black maw of the opening gaped beneath my feet. As the rock rolled away, I fell forward, caught the edge of the hole, and dropped. I screamed as the world fell past me, and the water spilling over the rocks

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

filled my mouth with dirt and gravel, stung my eyes, and I hit the sloping wall of the passage, and slid on a carpet of running mud like a man in a toboggan, careening off the rough surface from which roots extended, plunging down and down, feet-first into the darkness. The channel sloped more steeply, and I gathered speed, screaming, and went faster, and could see nothing but the deep grave funneling up past me and an instant of dim light high overhead behind me as lightning hit the night sky again.

Then I was shooting forward on a less inclined plane, still too fast to stop myself though I tried to dig in my hands and ripped flesh for the trouble, dirt clogging under my fingernails ... and I shot out of the end of the tunnel, like a gobbet of spit, and somehow my legs were under me, but there was no floor, and I dropped into open emptiness, and hit still accelerating forward, and managed half a dozen running steps before I smashed full face into a rock wall, and I lost everything. I didn't even know when I'd fallen.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

* * * *

The light was green. Pale green, the color of moldy bread that seems to be blue till you look closely. The light came from the walls of the cavern. It was an enormous cavern, and the first thing I heard was the sound of a vast audience applauding. I fainted again. The pain in my face was excruciating. I knew I'd broken parts, and I fainted again. The pale green light expanded in the space behind my eyes, and I went away.

When I swam through the pain and the film of swirling shapes, I regained consciousness in the same position, propped against the wall of the cavern. This time I understood that the applauding masses were the sound of the sea hitting the cliffs. At each ovation, water rushed into the cavern from far across the floor, and I realized we had to be at least two hundred yards inside the cliff. The cavern glowed with a sickly green luminosity and I could make out tunnels that led off this central chamber,

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

dozens of tunnels, going off in every direction around the circular centerplace.

I tried to move, and the pain in my face nearly sent me into darkness again. I raised a filthy hand to my cheek and felt bone protruding from the skin. My nose was broken. My teeth had bitten through my upper lip. My right eye seemed to have something wet and loose obscuring the lens.

I dropped my hand to the rock and dirt floor beside me, and my palm slid in something moist and soft. I looked down. The headless body of a young woman lay twisted on the floor beside me. I screamed and pinwheeled away from the corpse.

Then I heard a chuckle, and looked with extreme pain and restriction of muscles to my left. Camilla's father—How did I know it was he? I don't know. It was he—hung head down from the rock wall, sticking to the surface of moist, mossy rock. Watching me.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

His scaly surface was not as clean and opalescent as I'd kept Camilla's. Rot clung to the scabrous flesh. There were more teeth in him, and larger than Camilla's.

He came away from the wall with a sucking sound and dropped to the floor of the cavern. Then, without difficulty—and I am a large man—he extended two of his arms and took me by the collar of the mac and dragged me across the floor, toward one of the tunnels on the far side of the chamber, through the river of seawater that ebbed and flowed as the audience applauded against the cliffs of Bennane Head.

He dragged me through the mouth of the tunnel, and we passed chamber after chamber, a vast labyrinth of cave system—and I looked in on Camilla's family, inhabiting the rooms beneath the Galloway moors.

In one chamber I saw nothing but bones, hundreds of thousands of bones, pale green with their gnawed-clean curves and knobs, hollow where the marrow had been sucked out. Bones in mountainous heaps

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

that clogged the chamber from floor to roof, and spilled out into the passage. He dragged me through the history of a thousand meals.

In another chamber were piles of clothing. Rags and garments, boots and dresses, shapeless masses of raiment that seemed to have come from a hundred eras. Plumed bonnets with moss growing on them, jodhpurs and corselets, leather greaves and housecoats, bedroom slippers and deer-stalkers, anoraks and cuirasses, masses of clothing thrown haphazardly and in a profusion that defied estimation, filling the large side-chamber like the clothes closet of a mad empress.

I cannot describe the drying and curing rooms, save to say that bodies and parts of bodies hung from hooks in the low ceilings. Men with their faces gone. Women with their breasts ripped away. Small boys without hands or feet or sex organs. A mound of dried, leathery babies.

And on, and on, and on.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

I could not stop him, he was too strong, I was too weak and in pain, and I was able merely to turn my head as we bumped along. Turned my head to see horror upon horror in this seemingly endless charnel house.

Into a cavernous hold far back in the system, where I finally, after fifteen years, confronted Camilla's family. All of them. The children of Sawney Beane.

And there, in the bosom of her loved ones, was the woman I loved. My cool and beautiful Camilla, with a gobbet of human flesh hanging from her lipless mouth, her fingerless hands redolent with blood.

In the center of the chamber was a great stone bowl. And as I lay there, watching, first one, then another, of Camilla's brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews—all the products of incestuous couplings—kneeled before the stone crucible and drank slurpingly from the thick, clotted liquor. I knew the name of that terrible brew.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

Camilla's father left me there and went to his wife and daughter. I knew at once who they were. The affection they showed toward one another, and the attention all the others lavished on them, indicated how pleased they were that the prodigal had, at last, returned. And bearing such a tender banquet as oblation to the family.

I saw the resemblance between mother and daughter.

And for the first time asked myself how old Camilla really was. I'd assumed she was young, but what did that mean in a lineal line where one hundred, two hundred years was only early maturity?

I was too terrified to move, and the nausea that swelled in my throat left me weak and empty.

Then Camilla came to me, and settled down beside me, and lifted my head and stroked my face with a bloody hand. And she kissed me. And I smelled the butcher shop on her lipless mouth. I almost cried: she still loved me.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

* * * *

What they spoke was barely a human tongue, a language that had been guttural and ancient when King James the First had tracked them to these caves, and dragged out Sawney and his wife, and eight sons, and six daughters, and eighteen grandsons, and fourteen granddaughters—forty-eight in all—but, ah, not *all*, as he thought—and shrove them all the way to Leith, and condemned all, without exception, to death: and, as the women watched, King James ordered that the men have first their penises, then their hands and feet, chopped off, and were left to bleed to death where they lay; and then he had the women hurled living into three great bonfires, where they, too, perished. But it was not the end of Sawney Beane's clan. For the caves beneath Galloway were deep, and many, and mazelike, and some survived. And literally went to ground, to breed anew.

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

I learned all this from the woman I loved, who spoke a second language. A tongue that was slick with terrible history.

And she told me that she loved me, would always love me. And she told me that it was cool and protected here. And told me that her family approved of her choice. And told me we could stay here. Together. In the bosom of her family. And not for a second did I see in her eyes the green, hungry glow in the eyes of her immense mother, who squatted across the floor all that night—I think it was still night—watching her intended son-in-law.

Camilla mewled and ran her tongue over me, and held me and rocked me. And spoke of our love.

Then, when I was able to stand, I ran. I turned and ran back the way we had come; and each of the horrors I had passed was a marker: the drying rooms, the hanging chambers, the rows of skulls in niches with tallow candles that had burned down centuries ago, the clothing room and

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

the bone room, where I grabbed a femur and, hearing feet pounding along behind me, turned and swung the longbone as hard as I could, and shattered the head of a scion of the family of Sawney Beane, perhaps Camilla's father, I don't know.

I found the sloping passage, and jumped and went half into the hole, and some rough appendage grasped my legs, and I kicked out, and heard a moan, and scrabbled up the slope and kept going, up and up and up toward the night sky that was now gray-blue with passing clouds and moonlight.

I went up, for my life, with the smell of slaughter from Camilla's kisses, fresh on my lips.

* * * *

She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother
by Harlan Ellison

I lie now in this room where I awoke this morning, *Clair de Lune* drifts up to me from Atlantis. I lie here, having left this brief chronicle, thinking of what I must do. I know I will return.

What I do not yet know, as I think of my rootless life and the emptiness I knew before I found Camilla in that gully, is whether I will dive down that hole in the cairn bearing gasoline and gelignite and a flamethrower if I can steal one from some armory somewhere...

Or if I will go to taste again the kisses of the woman I love, the only woman who has ever loved me.

This I know, however: Atlantis never existed.

BEAN, Sawney (fl. mid-1400's). Scottish highwayman, mass murderer, and cannibal. Illiterate and uncouth, he lived with his wife and 14 children in a giant cave by the desolate seacoast along the Galloway region in southwestern Scotland. For over 25 years the Bean family assaulted, robbed, and killed travelers—men, women, and children—on their way to and from Edinburgh and Glasgow in the north. Their depredations included cannibalism as well. Finally, an intended victim who had seen his wife knocked from her horse, her throat immediately slit, and her body cannibalized, managed to escape to warn the Scottish king at Glasgow. Some 400 men and bloodhounds, led by the king, tracked down and, after a fierce battle, captured the Beans in their cave, in which were found numerous mutilated cadavers. Sawney and the rest were brought to Leith, showed not the slightest repentance for their crimes, and were promptly burned to death at the stake without a trial. It was estimated that the Beans' murder victims totaled well over 1,000 persons.

Extract from DICTIONARY OF CULPRITS AND CRIMINALS
(George C. Kohn; Scarecrow Press: London, 1986)

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this story by going back to your bookshelf: [Click Here](#)