

THE MUSIC ROOM

BY STEPHEN KING

1. The Enderbys were in their music room—so they called it, although it was really just the spare bedroom. Once they had thought it would be little James or Jill Enderby’s nursery, but after ten years of trying, it seemed increasingly unlikely that a Baby Dear would arrive out of the Nowhere and into the Here. They had made their peace with childlessness. At least they had work, which was a blessing in a year when men were still standing in bread lines. There were fallow periods, it was true, but when the job was on, they could afford to think of nothing else, and they both liked it that way.
2. Mr. Enderby was reading *The New York Journal-American*, a new daily not even halfway through its first year of publication. It was sort of a tabloid and sort of not. He usually began with the comics, but when they were on the job he turned to the city news first, scanning through the stories quickly, especially the police blotter.
3. Mrs. Enderby sat at the piano, which had been a wedding gift from her parents. Occasionally she stroked a key, but did not press any. Tonight the only music in the music room was the symphony of nighttime traffic on Third Avenue, which came in through the open window. Third Avenue, third floor. A good apartment in a sturdy brownstone. They rarely heard their neighbors above and below, and their neighbors rarely heard them. Which was all to the good.
4. From the closet behind them came a single thump. Then another. Mrs. Enderby spread her hands as if to play, but when the thumps ceased, she put her hands in her lap.
5. “Still not a peep about our pal George Timmons,” Mr. Enderby said, rattling the paper.
6. “Perhaps you should check the *Albany Herald*,” she said. “I believe the newsstand on Lexington and 60th carries it.”
7. “No need,” he said, turning to the funnies at last. “The *Journal-American* is good enough for me. If Mr. Timmons has been reported missing in Albany, let those interested search for him there.”

MY NOTES:

Does the style of writing remind you of another author you have read? How does King build suspense in the story?

8. "That's fine, dear," said Mrs. Enderby. "I trust you." There was really no reason not to; to date, the work had gone swimmingly. Mr. Timmons was their sixth guest in the specially reinforced closet.
9. Mr. Enderby chuckled. "The Katzenjammer Kids are at it again. This time they've caught Der Captain fishing illegally—shooting a net from a cannon, in fact. It's quite amusing. Shall I read it to you?"
10. Before Mrs. Enderby could answer, another thump came from the closet, and faint sounds that might have been shouts. It was difficult to tell, unless one put one's ear right up against the wood, and she had no intention of doing that. The piano bench was as close to Mr. Timmons as she intended to get, until it was time to dispose of him. "I wish he'd stop."
11. "He will, dear. Soon enough."
12. Another thump, as if to refute this.
13. "That's what you said yesterday."
14. "It seems I was premature," said Mr. Enderby, and then, "Oh, gosh—Dick Tracy is once more on the hunt for Pruneface."
15. "Pruneface gives me the willies," she said, without turning. "I wish Detective Tracy would put him away for good."
16. "That will never happen, dear. People claim to root for the hero, but it's the villains they remember."
17. Mrs. Enderby made no reply. She was waiting for the next thump. When it came—if it came—she would wait for the one after that. The waiting was the worst part. The poor man was hungry and thirsty, of course; they had ceased feeding and watering him three days ago, after he had signed the last check, the one that emptied his account. They had emptied his wallet at once, of almost two hundred dollars. In a depression as deep as this one, two hundred was a jackpot, and his watch might add as much as twenty more to their earnings (although, she admitted to herself, that might be a trifle optimistic).
18. Mr. Timmons's checking account at Albany National had been the real mother lode: eight hundred. Once he was hungry enough, he had been happy to sign several checks made out to cash and with the notation "Business Expenses"

written in the proper spot on each one. Somewhere a wife and kiddies might be depending on that money when Father didn't come home from his trip to New York, but Mrs. Enderby did not allow herself to dwell on that. She preferred to imagine Mrs. Timmons having a rich mama and papa in Albany's Mansion District, a generous couple right out of a Dickens novel. They would take her in and care for her and her children, little boys who might be endearing scamps like Hans and Fritz, the Katzenjammer Kids.

19. "Sluggo broke a neighbor's window and is blaming it on Nancy," Mr. Enderby said with a chuckle. "I swear he makes the Katzenjammers look like angels!"
20. "That awful hat he wears!" Mrs. Enderby said.
21. Another thump from the closet, and a very hard one from a man who had to be on the verge of starvation. But Mr. Timmons had been a big one. Even after a generous dose of chloral hydrate in his glass of dinner wine, he had nearly overpowered Mr. Enderby. Mrs. Enderby had had to help. She sat on Mr. Timmons's chest until he quieted. Unladylike, but necessary. That night, the window on Third Avenue had been shut, as it always was when Mr. Enderby brought home a guest for dinner. He met them in bars. Very gregarious, was Mr. Enderby, and very good at singling out businessmen who were alone in the city—fellows who were also gregarious and enjoyed making new friends. Especially new friends who might become new clients of one business or another. Mr. Enderby judged them by their suits, and he always had an eye for a gold watch chain.
22. "Bad news," Mr. Enderby said, a frown creasing his brow.
23. She stiffened on the piano bench and turned to face him. "What is it?"
24. "Ming the Merciless has imprisoned Flash Gordon and Dale Arden in the radium mines of Mongo. There are these creatures that look sort of like alligators—"
25. Now from the closet came a faint, wailing cry. Within its soundproofed confines, it must have been a shriek almost loud enough to rupture the poor man's vocal cords. How could Mr. Timmons

still be strong enough to voice such a howl? He had already lasted a day longer than any of the previous five, and his somehow gruesome vitality had begun to prey on her nerves. She had been hoping that tonight would see the end of him.

26. The rug in which he was to be wrapped was waiting in their bedroom, and the panel truck with ENDERBY ENTERPRISES painted on the side was parked just around the corner, fully gassed and ready for another trip to the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. When they were first married, there had actually been an Enderby Enterprises. The depression—what the *Journal-American* had taken to calling the *Great Depression*—had put an end to that two years ago. Now they had this new work.
27. “Dale is afraid,” continued Mr. Enderby, “and Flash is trying to buck her up. He says Dr. Zarkov will—”
28. Now came a fusillade of thumps: ten, maybe a dozen, and accompanied by more of those shrieks, muffled but still rather chilling. She could imagine blood beading Mr. Timmons’s lips and dripping from his split knuckles. She could imagine how his neck would have grown scrawny, and how his formerly plump face would have stretched long as his body gobbled the fat and musculature there in order to stay alive.
29. But no. A body couldn’t cannibalize itself to stay alive, could it? The idea was as unscientific as phrenology. And how thirsty he must be by now!
30. “It’s so annoying!” she burst out. “I hate it that he just goes *on* and *on* and *on*! Why did you have to bring home such a strong man, dear?”
31. “Because he was also a well-to-do man,” Mr. Enderby said mildly. “I could see that when he opened his wallet to pay for our second round of drinks. What he’s contributed will keep us for three months. Five, if we stretch it.”
32. Thump, and thump, and thump. Mrs. Enderby put her fingers to the delicate hollows of her temples and began to rub.
33. Mr. Enderby looked at her sympathetically. “I can put a stop to it, if you like. He won’t be able to struggle much in his current state; certainly not after having expended so much energy. A quick slash with your sharpest butcher knife. Of course, if *I* do the deed, *you* will have to do the clean-up.

It's only fair."

34. Mrs. Enderby looked at him, shocked. "We may be thieves, but we are *not* murderers."
35. "That is not what people would say, if we were caught." He spoke apologetically but firmly enough, just the same.
36. She clasped her hands in the lap of her red dress tightly enough to whiten the knuckles, and looked straight into his eyes. "If we were called into the dock, I would hold my head up and tell the judge and the jury that we were victims of circumstance."
37. "And I'm sure you would be very convincing, dear."
38. Another thump from behind the closet door, and another cry. Gruesome. That was the word for his vitality, the exact one. *Gruesome*.
39. "But we are *not* murderers. Our guests simply lack sustenance, as do so many in these terrible times. We don't kill them; they simply fade away."
40. Another shriek came from the man Mr. Enderby had brought home from McSorley's over a week ago. It might have been words. It might have been *for the love of God*.
41. "It won't be long now," Mr. Enderby said. "If not tonight, then tomorrow. And we won't have to go back to work for quite awhile. And yet . . ."
42. She looked at him in that same steady way, hands clasped. "And yet?"
43. "Part of you enjoys it, I think. Not this part, but the actual moment when we take them, as a hunter takes an animal in the woods."
44. She considered this. "Perhaps I do. And I *certainly* enjoy seeing what they have in their wallets. It reminds me of the treasure hunts Papa used to put on for me and my brother when we were children. But afterward . . ." She sighed. "I was never good at waiting."
45. More thumps. Mr. Enderby turned to the business section. "He came from Albany, and people who come from there get what they deserve. Play something, dear. That will cheer you up."
46. So she got her sheet music out of the piano bench and played "I'll Never Be the Same." Then she played "I'm in a Dancing Mood" and "The Way You Look Tonight." Mr. Enderby applauded and

<p>called for an encore on that one, and when the last notes died away, the thumps and cries from the soundproofed and specially reinforced closet had ceased.</p> <p>47. "Music!" Mr. Enderby proclaimed. "It hath powers to soothe the savage beast!"</p> <p>48. That made them laugh together, comfortably, the way people do when they have been married for many years and have come to know each other's minds.</p>	
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After the students have shared their stories, introduce the above story, "The Music Room" by Stephen King, which reflects the sense of isolation that can be observed in the painting. Since many students may be familiar with Stephen King (if only in movies), they can probably second guess what kind of story they are about to read. Guide students to see how both artist and writer illuminate similar themes through their work, and how these themes are prevalent in contemporary life. Ask questions that help students understand that the work of both Hopper and King reveal the loneliness and sense of isolation that seems to be a paradoxical yet inevitable part of America's continuing growth and success.