

Mr. Enderman

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High School Division Winner

Mr. Enderman liked to play with fire, but the children didn't pay much mind to that.

They paid more attention to the knives in his dresser underneath his green khakis, the guns in the cabinets in the kitchen of the house among his cooking utensils, the poison stored in tiny jelly jars on top of his desk. They noticed the bloody bags he brought into the house from his nightly encounters and how calm he looked the night of a kill. They smelled the lemon he put in his afternoon cup of sweet tea and the home-y scent of biscuits baking in the oven. They heard the crash of papers being thrown across the room when he was frustrated (although he wasn't very often), the drip-drop of the broken tap, the man's heavy breathing when carrying something heavy. The crash of rain on the window pane. The birds chirping outside. The way the children found death to sound—silent, mortal and yet, in that house with Mr. Enderman, rapturous. Like a flame slowly building and then, after becoming nearly large enough to catch on to the walls around it, waning down until there was nothing left but a single, tiny ash.

The children liked to know the date, but they refrained from counting the days. It was like an unwritten rule for them—you notice the days, see that Wednesday is closer to Thursday than it is to Saturday, and the time that passes only gets longer, more billowing. No one had ever told them this but they knew, if only from noticing when playing with their friends a while ago, that time flies when you're having fun.

They didn't have fun much these days.

They watched from behind the curtains and in front of the man's shiny double-windows, keeping their eyes peeled for anything new, anything exciting, anything disturbingly joyous. Huddled together, the children would look for that man—that Mr. Enderman character—who toiled, hard working, late into the night, only to return happy as a clam. Canvas bag slung over his shoulder. BLT club sandwich from that diner across the street (Sally's, was it?) cradled in a plastic bag between the side of his damp-with-perspiration black T-shirt and a hairy yet rather pale-looking arm.

Their eyes had long become accustomed to the flesh that the man dragged in night after night—the bodies, the bags, the bright red torn clothing against his perfectly white linoleum flooring. He cleaned it all up, too, after disposing of the evidence somewhere that the children's eyes could not wander to, taking a washrag and scrubbing the floors meticulously, a bright, cheery smile adorned across his face. He was as happy as he could ever get in those moments—the time before morning - but then daylight would come streaming in through the windows and he would remember, and his lips would be straining to hold that grin. Coffee cup in a chronically shaking hand. Feet tapping the floor anxiously.

Mr. Enderman hardly ever went so far as to throw or break things, however—“Of course not,” he reasoned with himself, “I am a gentleman, at the very least!”—and so instead he would anxiously pace the day away, waiting, looking at the wall where the clock used to be (he had long ago disposed of it, when the ticking noise became too loud for his sensitive ears and he couldn’t help but do away with not one, but *two* poor, poor victims that night. He tried to pace himself, of course. Didn’t want his obsession to become unhealthy).

Mr. Enderman could not see the children but they could see him in all his glory, watching from inside the canvas bags that he had carefully placed them in once upon a time. And they took advantage of this invisibility of theirs, as most children would, lighting candles in rooms at random times of the night, spilling hefty jars of cyanide all over the floor, and making rather clumsy rackets during the nights when they were feeling especially humorous.

And, of course, there came the night when Mr. Enderman would have to leave for good.

The children loved the man, of course - who wouldn’t? He was infatuating. Every smile, every wrinkle of his brow, every memory of the man was never to be forgotten.

But he still had to go.

And so, when the time came, the children didn’t make a peep, tiptoeing across the long, dark hallway, towards his bedroom, past the knives in his dresser drawer and the poison in the jelly jars, away from the curtains that they used to call home.

They built a fire in his room that night while he slept, warming themselves, devouring the flames that climbed up out of the ashes. And the red, the orange, the yellowness of it all sank into the man’s hardwood floors, engulfing a new kind of poison - the poison of Mr. Enderman’s house.

The children jumped with joy as they saw the man wake up that night, staring out confusedly into the bright abyss of hungry flames inching towards his bed. They squealed, giggling, as he began to shout for help; they outright laughed when his facial features began to melt, becoming one. They danced when his legs were charred to a crisp; they threw things in a fit of happiness when they could no longer tell if the ashes scattered around on the ground were part of his body or the floor.

When the children flew from the house that night, all they left was a single, tiny ash, too small to be noticed by anyone. And Mr. Enderman’s horrified face was reflected in it, finally looking at them – *seeing* them – as they floated upwards, into the great abyss of the night sky.

Mr. Enderman played with fire, and so the children did too.