

MIND GAMES

by

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It was a terrible dark day clouds drifted across the evening sky. May Baker was parking her red Fiat Punto in front of her semi-detached house. She wore her dyed light brown hair in a bob.

One by one hailstones began to fall, they were small at first, but then they became larger. Anthony Baker was staring through the living room window. The cold wind didn't belong to the time of year.

"I'm home," Anthony heard his wife calling from the front door. She was short in stature and spoke with a young voice. A minute later, May entered the living room, outside the hail ceased. For a moment Anthony glanced at his wife's dyed hair. A chain with brown wooden beads hung around her neck. She wore green eye shadow much to his dislike. Why did she have to make such a mess of her face? A little bit of make-up he didn't mind. His mother never put much on. She only used lipstick and rouge. He turned to face the window again.

"She looks like a whore. Why is he still with her?" A voice spoke inside Anthony's head. "How was your day, sweetheart?" May kissed her husband on the cheek. "I'm going to make tea, do you want some?" Awaiting no answer May left Anthony alone and headed

into the kitchen. She turned on the chip pan, and switched on the kettle. When she returned to the living room she held two steaming mugs of tea in her hands.

“Terrible weather isn’t it? I’m glad I took the car to work this morning. Come sit here on the couch darling.” May patted the empty space beside her. As she leaned forward towards the coffee table she put the back of her hands against her mug to warm her fingers.

“She talks too much.”

Anthony did not move; he quietly stared out of the window. His body slightly slumped. The hailstones had damaged every single daffodil in the front garden. They reminded him of death. All flowers reminded him of death, but daffodils especially did. He turned around, carefully counting his steps to the couch. Politely smiling at his wife he sat down beside her.

Ever since he lost his job, May worked full time at the County Council in Dublin. Although she told him she worked there, Anthony wasn’t sure she actually did. It was hard to know what to believe.

Strange things kicked off around him after his father’s death. Before long Anthony discovered his wife turned out to be a member of a secret group. Of course, she denied everything when he asked her. Nevertheless, he could see it in her eyes every time she came home from her so-called council job.

To protect himself, Anthony couldn’t let her know that he didn’t believe her. He might be in great danger if she ever found out. She might inform her superiors. They could change his life into a nightmare. They’d tried to kill him once already.

One day while driving home from his work, the car abruptly gave up the ghost. The car came to a sudden stop in the middle of a traffic jam. Afterwards Anthony learned he had been extremely lucky. Thanks to an electrical failure in the car, the bomb placed by one of the members of May’s secret group had failed to explode. Barely a few seconds after he switched on the radio, all the electrical equipment had ceased to work.

When the car was fully repaired, May was the sole driver of the vehicle. Not for any money in the world would he drive that car again.

“You scored five points for making the tea,” Anthony said after he saw the tea in front of him. He stared at a painting hanging on the wall across from the couch; a picturesque scene of a young deer and its mother. The young animal looked back at him.

“That is very kind of you, darling,” May smiled at her husband. *What is wrong with him giving me points for things I do, as if we play some kind of game?* She worried about him ever since his father’s funeral. Lately things got worse with Anthony. One of her colleagues at work suggested he might be depressed. But what did she know about Anthony? May never heard that a depressed person got up in the middle of the night to fry potatoes. After they finished their tea, May went outside to put the rubbish bin at the side of the road for collection. Normally this was Anthony’s job, but she wanted to have a chat with the neighbour. Anna usually worked in the garden at this time of the evening.

“Sometimes it’s like he’s living in a world of his own,” May confided in her friend. She spotted that the plants in her neighbour’s garden were damaged too by the downpour. “At times I get the feeling I don’t exist anymore. I pretend everything is hunky dory, but I wish I knew what is going on inside his head.”

“Have you asked him to seek professional help?” Anna leaned on the dry stonewall her husband built the previous summer. The mortar, which held the different sizes of stones together, looked fresh, although here and there little patches of moss emerged between the grooves.

“Well I tried, but you know how he is. He says there is nothing wrong with him. I am worried about him. I am afraid that one day I will find him in big trouble. There are nights he hardly sleeps. I hear him getting out of bed, and then he goes around the house as if he’s looking for something. I don’t know what he’s doing. When I ask him what the matter is, he just says he can’t sleep.” May’s eyes looked tired.

“I’ve done everything to convince him to visit our GP. If only he decided to be less stubborn! He is opening new packages of food, even when already opened items aren’t finished. It is very worrying to me working full-time. Anthony is doing the cooking and cleaning. It is getting to a stage that I am afraid that he might hurt himself. The other thing is that he doesn’t want me to help him with the household chores. Whenever I offer him a hand in the kitchen, he doesn’t want to hear it. This isn’t the man I married.

Now and then he lets me make the occasional cup of tea, like tonight, but that's about it."

"Well, what can you do, May. You're doing everything you can already."

Unexpectedly Anna touched May's hand. "There is a lot of smoke coming out of your kitchen window, is Anthony cooking something?"

"What? Oh, no," May exclaimed, "I left the chip pan on."

May ran as fast as possible to her back door. When she opened the door smoke had filled the kitchen. "Anthony," she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Anthony where are you?" In the meantime Anna showed up with her husband Roland.

"Are you alright?" Roland asked.

"I don't know, Anthony isn't answering, I'm calling 999, it's ringing," Anna said. "We must get him out," May cried. Ready to enter the house Roland grabbed her by the arm.

"Wait," he said. "Let me go in."

"No, he's my husband, I will get him," May argued. Before Roland could stop her she touched the door-handle. She let go with a shriek of pain. Roland took the opportunity to force his way past May. Keeping as low as possible he crawled towards the living room. He knew the layout of the house. He found Anthony sitting in front of the TV. The man seemed oblivious to everything.

"My goodness, are you stupid or something?" Roland asked. "Hey, are you blind and deaf? I'm talking to you. Your house is on fire. Come on, you have to go," Roland encouraged Anthony to get up.

"Leave me alone, everybody leave me alone. I don't want to go," Anthony roared.

"We don't have time for arguing." Roland shouted back, he grabbed his neighbour by the arm and made an attempt to raise him from the couch.

"Oh no you don't, I'm staying put. It's up to you what you want, but I stay here."

To Roland's relief the door between the kitchen and the living room kept the smoke out of the room, but not for much longer.

Roland concentrated on the sound of the sirens of the fire truck, he jumped when the doorbell rang; at the same time someone banged on the door. "The fire service," A man shouted.

It took a couple of hours before the Bakers were able to go back to their house again. The kitchen would need to be re-decorated though. Nevertheless except for the smoke from the chip pan there wasn't much other damage. A fire extinguisher was enough to quench the impending fire.

"Why didn't you want to get out of the house?" May asked, when she and Anthony were back home. They kept the door between the kitchen and the den closed. The windows stood wide open in the kitchen to let the burned fumes escape.

"What do you mean, I didn't see the need," Anthony answered.

A deep sigh escaped May's mouth. "You are unbelievable, our house was on fire and you sat there watching TV. Don't you realize Roland risked his life for you?"

"I said I didn't want to leave," Anthony declared.

"So you wanted to kill yourself?" May asked.

"No of course not," Anthony answered.

"My goodness, do I have to spell it out for you?" May shrieked her patience ran thin.

"We are skating on extremely thin ice you know."

"I didn't know you could skate, but I can't," Anthony said.

"Will you stop this?" May exclaimed. "I'm getting tired of your games."

"What games?" Anthony asked. "I don't know what you're talking about?"

"You're incredible I've had it with you, I'm going to bed. Oh, and before you deem to join me the answer is no. You may sleep here on the couch," May said. She slammed the living room door behind her.

Sure his wife wouldn't disturb him Anthony removed a couple of books from a shelf. He pulled a 400 page A5 copy book through the opening. He hadn't used it yet, he didn't know what to write. No, he didn't know where to begin.

Dear diary, or what shall I call you? I have nobody who I can trust these words to. I have difficulties even to tell you. My thoughts are all in a knot. I don't know where to begin.

It's like being in a whirlpool. There is no beginning and no end. I am afraid of showing my feelings to others. Even my own wife can't be trusted and she doesn't understand me. At least here with you nobody can see me. But still it is hard to let go. Some people say it's good to cry some times. It clears up the clouds around you. But I'm afraid when I

start crying I won't be able to stop and continue for the rest of the week. I have the same dream every night. I'm trying to leave a house, but there are all these doors I have to go through. The doors keep coming and I never am able to leave the house. I'm getting nowhere.

A few weeks later a pair of gloved hands opened the door swiftly. A man with dark, cropped hair entered the Baker's house carrying a leather briefcase. He had waited in his rented car across the road for the couple to leave. He calmly walked to the front door as they disappeared around the corner, and using a master key, it gave him easy access to the house.

Afraid to attract attention the intruder closed the curtains in the living room. Next, he switched on a pair of dim lights. Their glow gave enough light for the man to see what he was doing.

The man opened his briefcase and removed several small items and placed them on the coffee table. When completely satisfied how each piece should fit, the man went into the kitchen. Keeping a flashlight ready, he cut off the electricity. With the aid of the flashlight, he finished his work.

Tired and somewhat intoxicated, Anthony and May returned home around midnight. Long after one o' clock the couple prepared for bed. Waiting for his wife to finish up in the bathroom, Anthony watched TV in bed.

Once in bed as well, May switched off like a light. Except for May's breathing, the room was quiet. Turning himself around for the fifth time, Anthony heard something hissing. It seemed to come from the other side of the room. Leaning on an elbow, he strained to hear what it could be. Certainly it couldn't be the radiators, since this time of the year they didn't use them. It wasn't May either.

Is there somebody whispering, or is it my imagination? He thought.

These were not the voices that he normally heard in his head. If they were voices at all, they sounded more like humming. Perhaps the music of the party still rang in his ears? Anthony rested his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. His thoughts returned to a cold day in February 1987 when he attended a boarding school in England, the day the world around him collapsed. His mother, suffering from bowel cancer, passed away during the night.

The hate he felt for the illness of his mother and the inner pain he experienced from losing her had made him deeply depressed. During the disastrous night he heard one of the boys in his room talking.

“We all lose our mother one day, be strong and you’ll get over it. Work hard in school and you will forget your pain.”

“Who said that?” Anthony asked. The three occupants in the other beds remained silent. None of the boys stirred.

“Who is there? Come on now this isn’t funny.” Confused and exhausted, Anthony fell back onto his pillow. However, no matter how tired he was, he could not catch any sleep. He couldn’t stop thinking about his mother. Why did the other boys in the room pretend they were sleeping?

The next morning at the breakfast table, he studied his room mates’ faces one by one. When the meal was nearly finished, a staff member came over to their table and said, “Come Anthony, I’ll take you to the airport.” He rose to follow the woman. The boys at the table mumbled their well wishes. A watery sun appeared from behind the grey clouds when Anthony and Mrs Brighton got into her car. She was very kind as they drove to the airport. He liked her very much. Since he entered boarding school, she’d become a second mother to Anthony. The way she played the piano during music lessons and her voice sounded like a nightingale when she sang.

Her face was soft while she manoeuvred the car through the traffic. It was hard not to look at her.

“Your uncle will be waiting for you in Dublin,” Mrs Brighton informed Anthony. She didn’t speak much while she drove. His constant staring at her made her feel uncomfortable.

This was by far the longest journey Anthony had ever undertaken in his life. Everything seemed to take at least twice as long as normal. At the airport the queues seemed endless. While he waited to get his passport checked, a man spoke a few words into his ear. Turning around to see who talked, Anthony noticed a family with three young children. It couldn’t have been one of them, or could it?

More than 19 years had passed since the death of his mother. From that moment on the sleepless nights began, especially after he drank a couple of beers. Lately, even a few

pints kept him up half the night. For some reason he got these flashbacks from his youth.

Anthony listened to the calm breathing of his wife. How could she sleep?

She probably dreamt about Anna. He'd seen how May looked at her, her eyes lighting up, twinkling like stars. He didn't really blame Anna for wanting some company after her husband died. Her family who lived in County Mayo had come over for the funeral and her mother had stayed for a month. It had been some tragic accident. He'd fallen from a rooftop. He was dead on impact.

The hissing noise Anthony heard earlier had disappeared. *I am right after all; the noises are the aftermath of the music ringing in my ears.*

"May deserves to sleep. He doesn't. He is lazy. He does nothing the whole fucking day." The voices in his head spoke.

"A long walk will do him good. He might sleep a little when he returns."

"Shall we let him?"

"Only if he walks far enough."

He had to obey the voices; Anthony sat up in his bed and quietly dressed himself. Fully dressed except for his coat and shoes, he descended the stairs. As he turned on the kitchen light, it saw it was 2.25 a.m.

He took his coat from a chair and heard one of the voices say, *"He doesn't need a coat; coats are for people who have earned them. He hasn't."*

Anthony knew what the voices demanded of him was ridiculous. However, he could not go against their orders. If he did, he might harm himself. If he didn't, terrible things were about to happen. He didn't want that on his conscience. Respectfully, he took off the coat.

Carefully closing the door behind him, Anthony commenced his walk through the night.

"I really feel this is the only option we have left," Anthony remembered his father saying to his mother while he walked. He'd hidden behind one of the banisters on the stairs.

"Is there no other way we can solve the problem?" His mother asked. Anthony knew who the problem was; they didn't have to mention one word about it. He'd grown into a badly behaved child. Why else did his father always say, "You're no use, the only thing you're good at is annoying us."

“I’m sorry but I have already sorted out a place for him in England,” his father said.

“You’re acting as if you’re glad to get rid of him,” his mother said.

“If you believe he can live here any longer, than you have another thing coming,” Father raised his voice.

“So I don’t have a say in the future of our child?” Mother cried.

“Don’t be silly old woman, put your tears away, I’m not going to change my mind because you’re crying.”

“But why England?” Mother asked.

“I want him as far away from us as possible. I’m sick and tired of his behaviour. See it as an investment in his future.”

Well after four o’clock Anthony arrived back from his walk. Tired, he crawled back into bed beside his wife. May still slept like a log.

A few hours later the voices woke him up.

“Switch on the computer, come on switch it on.”

“Yeah, let him have a look at his emails.”

Obedying the voices, Anthony switched on the computer. He followed the instructions in one of his email messages.

The next morning May Baker scanned the Irish Independent for news at the breakfast table.

“Virus attacks office workers,” she read aloud.

“A pugnacious computer virus holds the country in its grip,” she continued reading while she took a sip from her tea.

“We are lucky at work our computers are well protected and we have no access to the Internet. That’s how you get them, isn’t it a virus?” May gazed hopefully at her husband.

A big part of her knew she spoke to him in vain, the part of her which still believed in him, diminished by the day.

The next sixty seconds felt like an eternity. May jumped when Anthony mumbled, “I better check my emails.”

Nothing much occurred during the weekend. Anthony only received a few emails. He became particularly amused after reading one of them. Due to the good news, he invited May for dinner at the local Chinese restaurant. When they arrived back home they were well fed.

"That was sweet of you, darling," May said to her husband when she switched on the living room light.

"Well, I think we deserved it." Anthony answered.

Later as they watched CSI Miami the doorbell rang. May stood up, but Anthony said.

"Let me, I don't want you to answer the door so late." In fact Anthony didn't want her to talk to any of her friends without him knowing what they said.

A few moments later Anthony re-entered the living room with two men, who were dressed in suits.

Not long after Anthony's computer had been taken away by the law enforcers the same men came knocking on the Baker's door once more. May had just returned from the local supermarket and was unloading the shopping bags from her car. She walked up to her front door holding a plastic bag in each hand.

She put the bags down at the door and asked, "aren't you the men who took my husband's computer the other day?"

"We are indeed. If you don't mind we like to have a word with your husband," one of the men answered.

"I'm not sure if I want to do this." May said. She looked sceptical at the man. What did they want from Anthony?

The second man produced a large envelope and pulled the contents out. "We have a warrant for his arrest."

"You've got to be kidding. My husband isn't a criminal. I'm not going to fall for this. For all I know you're thieves. Get out of my way." May pushed the men aside using her elbows.

"Anthony help me, help me please," she yelled. The house stayed quiet.

"Calm down Mrs. Baker we are the real deal."

“Where is your uniform then?” Or didn’t your wife do the laundry on Monday?” May was staring hard at the men. She began searching her handbag for her mobile phone.

A significant time past before a bolt was removed from the front door and a key turned, a man in a white fleece top and black corduroy trousers stood on the threshold.

“Anthony Baker we are arresting you on suspicion of terrorism.” The man grabbed Anthony’s arms and in a quick move hand cuffed him.

“Wait a minute not so fast,” May protested. “Show me the warrant.”

“They want me to come with them to the Garda station,” Anthony said, to clear up some misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding”? May asked. She looked at the men in astonishment.

“What is he talking about? And who are you? “What are you doing with my husband, he’s no criminal.”

“There are a lot of questions,” one of the men said. We’re Detectives and we have reason to believe your husband is involved in a crime.

“Where is your proof”? May asked.

“I’m sure we’ll find it here,” replied the other Detective. He stood near the desk where Anthony’s computer stood. He unplugged the machine and the hard drive box from the monitor and keyboard.

"They look at him, why do they always look at him? We don't like them to spy on us."

"Go away, leave me alone," Anthony Baker said to the voices in his head. He sat at one of the tables in the St. Joseph Institute's common room. Several other patients occupied other chairs. Some were playing a game of scrabble, others a game of chess. A small group of men were engaged in a discussion. A few men were reading a book. No one in particular paid attention to Anthony. There were four male nurses all in white uniform present in the room. Two of them were chatting and looked around the room from time to time. The other two nurses both played a game of scrabble with a few patients; they also scanned the room every few minutes. Everything was quiet.

"Stop looking at me, mind your own business," Anthony said out loud. His speech was slow.

"Al right, alright, Baker, nobody is looking at you," one of the scrabble playing nurses said.

The teeth of the man grew larger, they changed into enormous fangs. All Anthony heard was growling. For a moment he thought he was smelling sulphur, but that couldn't be true. Neither could the green yellow vapour fill the room. But why did he see it then? And who was the man in rags? *What does he want from me?*

"Keep away from me," Anthony screamed. He got up from his chair and threw it through the recreation room. It nearly hit one of the other patients.

Immediately the two nurses who had been chatting hurried to the trouble maker. One tried to put an arm around Anthony in an attempt to calm him down. "There is no one here who wants to harm you Anthony, let me take you to your room."

"He's lying, they are all lying."

"Yeah he needs no listening to, he's one of them."

Anthony pushed his hands against both ears. "NO, I'm not listening to you, you're not real."

“That’s right, the voices are in your head,” the man with the fangs moved nearer, he growled even louder. His yellow eyes pierced Anthony’s. Shaking of fear he looked away.

In an attempt to escape the creature Anthony made for the door, it was locked.

“Oh no, what is it now?”

“He is giving up, is he?”

He should, he doesn’t do anything else, he’s a failure.

“Shut up,” Anthony shouted to the voices. “Or I kill myself.” He swayed a broken piece of glass in front of his own eyes. “Do you see this? I’ll kill myself, if you don’t open the door and let me go.”

“Anthony, Anthony,” a voice arose from the mist.

“Keep away from me.”

“I can’t help you if you don’t allow me to come near,” the voice said. “You want me to open the door don’t you?”

“Yes.”

The man approached the patient, step by step he moved closer. “It’s me Doctor Greystone.”

“Open the door,” Anthony demanded. Another part of him had taken over. He was no longer afraid. It seemed weird but underneath his fear he’d known all along he was seeing things which couldn’t be real. To show the staff he was serious he put the piece of glass against his throat.

“Do it, do it now.”

Doctor Greystone did as he was told. Immediately Anthony took advantage of the situation. He ran down the white washed corridor of the institute. Four male nurses chased after him. His fat stomach made running difficult. Every couple of feet he made a desperate lunge at the handrails and held on to them tenaciously, his face flushed from exertion. Repeatedly the men pried his hands from the rails.

Before Anthony became aware of what was happening, the men grabbed hold of him. While the other men held him down, Doctor Greystone stuck a syringe into Anthony’s arm.

Sometime later, Anthony noticed the nurses brought him in the padded cell again. A tray with food stood in one of the corners of the room. A red collared smartie was waiting for him in a small plastic medicine cup.

“How dare they put me in here, what did I do wrong this time?” He thought.

He picked up the tray and smashed it against the wall. The padded wall bounced the mug of tea towards his head. Only because of his swift reaction, the mug missed him by an inch. He picked the smartie up from the floor and put it in one of his pockets.

“They must think I’m crazy to give me Largacil. I’m not taking it, they’re not going to control my mind”. He couldn’t trust any of them.

He scanned the cell for hidden cameras and bugs as he marched around. *Perhaps I should have checked earlier for them.*

Hopefully nobody had seen what he’d done. Finished checking the cell, he sat down on the floor with his legs crossed and began to count the buttons in the four walls.

If only he could get rid of those voices in his head. He’d spent three months in this place already and things hadn’t changed for the better at all, medicine or not, although most of the time he didn’t take it. The worse were the visual hallucinations. They’d begun when he had been stuck in that God forsaken traffic jam.

He moved his car a few meters forward. He was surrounded by cars and trucks. He was standing in the traffic jam for more than 40 minutes when a smell of rotten eggs filled the car.

“What is this?” Anthony thought. A green yellow trail of fog appeared from the dashboard. Steadily the mist surrounded him. The rotten eggs turned into a smell of death. Pinching his nose he grabbed his stomach.

“Ouch! What’s that?” He pushed the door of the car open. Vomit heaved from his stomach onto the side of the road. Afraid to look back he left the door open.

“I have to get out of here, this isn’t normal.”

Running along the line of cars Anthony didn’t hear the people honk their car horns. Instead he heard a howling noise, the howling of a green ghost which smelled of decay. His legs didn’t want to do what he told them, they became paralyzed, he could barely move. The sound and smell came nearer.

A hand touched his shoulder.

“Wooooah!” Anthony jumped out of fright. He turned around. Behind him stood two figures in rags, their breath stank of decay, death. Where their eyes should have been were dark holes. To his disgust Anthony saw worms crawling from the eye sockets. Anthony’s heart was pounding in his chest.

“Go away from me, leave me alone,” he cried. “No, no, go away you’re not real. Help me, help me, please.”

But no one came to his rescue instead the zombies threw him to the ground. Powerless Anthony lay there unable to move or scream, while the creatures clawed the flesh of his bones.

An hour after Anthony Baker was confined into the padded room, the door of the isolation cell opened. By that time, he’d counted the buttons on the walls twice. He wasn’t sure yet whether he’d counted them correctly, though. He found it hard to focus. Ever since he lost his mother, his concentration was diminishing. Soon after she died, Anthony began to hear voices. In the beginning they were friendly, and most of the time he heard his own mother’s voice. However, following his father’s death, he experienced violent and hostile voices. One of those voices in particular brought him nothing but misery.

“There is someone who wants to talk to you, Baker.” The nurse sounded bored.

“Who is it?”

“It’s an American chap. He is in the director’s office.”

It took several moments before Anthony got up from the floor. He stretched his legs; They’d become stiff from sitting in the same position. Even though St. Joseph’s was not a real prison, it sure felt like one to Anthony.

Anthony and the nurse passed the cell units as they walked through the corridors, each one was equipped with its own dining and social areas. The dining area was deserted. None of the patients ever ate in the dining room. The patients still ate in the solitude of their own rooms. There wasn’t enough staff to keep an eye on all of them.

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