

ENGLISH: *SPIES*

Our sanity depends on a clear understanding of what is and isn't real.

Monday October 1st, 2012

I'm sitting in the library, trying to think of what to write. I know that exams are coming. I'm aware of their importance in my life, my career. I'm aware that it's getting late in the afternoon and I know that if I don't leave soon it's going to get dark. I'm deeply aware of the girl opposite me, clicking her pen hundreds of times a minute. I can feel the pressure of my legs on the chair and the rate of my own breathing. I sense the presence of hundreds of others sitting in this room, thinking, their minds ticking over with thoughts as they work and study. I wonder if everyone else in the room is as aware of this as I am, if they're aware of these things around them. While perceptions differ from person to person, surely there are things, events, objects that one could not deny are real. Perhaps we even cling to these things, utilize them so we can relate to others. Perhaps they even help us to establish what is "real". And maybe if we deny them, we risk isolating ourselves from society and our identity in the world. These relatable ideas, like the way we tell time, the way we measure distance, the way we are aware of the objects and people around us, help us function in the world and help us to remain sane. If we lose touch of them, we risk becoming socially disconnected from our society. Our understandings of these "real" ideas are key to our survival.

But maybe our understanding of what is truth is unclear, for we know that there are few things in this world that we can prove for sure. The truth can often be ambiguous or difficult to comprehend. Answers are often hidden by the convoluted layers of society or they are misinterpreted. We often lack seeing both sides of the story. Did Stephen, from Michael Frayn's *Spies* see all sides of the story? Indeed he did not. In fact he was rather blind for the most part of it. Stephen and Keith's game, the fantasy game where Mrs Hayward was a spy, became reality for Stephen. It broke free of his imagination and became truth in his eyes. What began as a "leap of pure fantasy" became the reality Stephen was all too quick to accept. And as he began to lose a sense of what was real, Stephen slowly became more and more paranoid and confused looking for answers. It's human nature to be curious, to seek answers to questions, to delve into the deep depths of life, to want to understand who we are, where we came from and why we're here. But often these answers don't reveal themselves readily. We can become confused by the chaos around us and sometimes we aren't able to grasp a true sense of what is real. Maybe it is impossible for us to understand at all what is truly real. Perhaps we rely on our fantasies to make sense of our environment, to categorize everything, to place things into order. But often, relying too much on our creative realities disconnects us from the world. We can suffer indefinitely from straying too far from what is true. And when truth is hard to uncover, insanity is often inevitable.

Insanity can also come when we choose to deny the truth. By denying the painful realities of life, we blur the distinctions between what we know is real and what isn't. We can in fact lose ourselves in the process. If we lie to ourselves on the surface for long enough, our inner selves can begin to believe the lies. Everything becomes open to question. Blanche Dubois, from Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, falls victim to such insanity after denying her past. Haunted by the deaths of her family, the loss of her husband and the shame of her promiscuous past, Blanche lies to herself on the surface, creating the appearance of being a prim and proper, young beauty. But by creating such a reality for herself, Blanche loses the distinctions between what is real and made up, and so begins her descent into mental insanity. By losing this sense, of what is real, Blanche like many others loses her grip on the world, seeking to cover up a painful past.

And so I'm sitting here, under the glorious blue skies of Melbourne wondering how do I even know that everything around me now, my life, my consciousness is real. How do I know that I'm in Melbourne under the arches of the entrance to the state library, how do I know that I'm Anna, that I'm 18, that I'm in year 12, that my family is my family? For if my sanity depends upon knowing what is real and what isn't, then perhaps I'm insane for not being able to prove what is real. Descartes

once said I think, therefore I am, a saying that continues to confuse me to this day. How can you be something without having any proof that you are? But maybe it isn't just the clear understanding of what is real and what isn't that deciphers whether we are sane or not, but also the belief that what we know is the truth. If deep down we believe something then perhaps that's all we need to be sane. All we need is to have a clear understanding in our head, which we truly believe in, of what is real. Maybe by glossing over some of the things we can't prove, we make our own connections, draw our own lines between the dots, we are able to live in the reality we create. We construct our own understanding of what is real and what isn't in order to survive. Did Stephen have a clear understanding of what was real at the end of Michael Frayn's novel? I mean, he had an understanding, but did not know the entire story of the goings on in *The Clove*. Yet, he was able to move on with his life, as sane as the next person. The belief that the events that unfolded must "never be known" was real enough to him to continue living. And perhaps, beliefs over what is real are strong enough to keep us sane in the world, not just knowing what is real and what isn't.

Understanding the difference between what is real and made up is vital if we want to function in society. For when we lose this sense, we lose our grip on reality and insanity can often be, inescapable.