

PREPOSITION OR PROPOSITION

‘We don’t play *at* the park’. We play *in* the park’ You do understand that the proper use of prepositions is important, don’t you?’ asked Mr. Jenkins, stretching his neck forward, leering into Adrian’s face.

‘Yes, sir,’ came the reply, as the thirteen-year-old squirmed in his chair.

‘Because if you don’t know things like that, you shouldn’t be at this school.’

‘I know, sir.’

‘You did say, ‘I know’ and not ‘No’, didn’t you, boy? ‘It is a privilege to come to a school like this. Boys like you are given chances that many do not have.’ There was silence as Mr. Jenkins retracted his neck into his starched collar, his eyes not deviating from their prey for a moment. If the smiles of the boys in the room could make a sound, there would have been a cacophony, but they could not, so silence reigned supreme. Adrian had learnt that it was best to say nothing in such a situation.

History had been Adrian’s favourite subject, but it wasn’t anymore. The battles in the history text books had been replaced by the battles in a classroom that only had one ruler. The sound and fury of 1066 had been replaced by the intimidation of silence.

That was twenty years ago, and Adrian was developing a successful life of his own, but he had never forgotten the moment when he had been humiliated, by the stare and the silence created by one man. That moment was perched, like an intimidating rock, remaining immovable, as it defied the natural flow of Adrian’s life from the summit of his birth to the welcoming sea of adult life, which would present its own turbulence. Despite his progress, Adrian could not rid himself of returning negative thoughts.

That evening, Adrian sat back in his train seat to read his newspaper. ‘School master arrested on suspicion of spying.’ ‘Not another one,’ smiled Adrian, shaking his head from side-to-side, before continuing. ‘Herbert Jenkins, long-time teacher at Lowestoft Independent School for Boys, has been accused of spying,’ reported an unnamed source.

Adrian was in a state of shock. Arriving home, he rushed into the living-room to watch the television news, which featured Jenkins’ story. There he was, twenty years older, but still with those eyes which were so recognisable. But they were not threatening their questioners with intimidation anymore, but stared up upwards, appearing to look towards the heavens to seek forgiveness. Jenkins’ mouth remained firmly closed, beyond repeating the same words, over and over again, as if conducting the microphones that bounced in disharmony in front of his face.

‘Have you been spying?’

‘No comment.’

‘Have you been lying?’

'No comment.'

'The proposition is that you do not believe that Britain is a country that should be respected and loved. If found guilty, what kind of example will that set to the boys that you teach?'

'No comment.'

Like Adrian all those years ago, Jenkins had learnt to say nothing. The accusation was that he had been an agent for a foreign power, driven by a hatred of capitalism and the privilege endowed upon all the boys that he taught. The newspaper stories claimed he had joined the school to develop friendships with its privileged parents, who he had secretly despised as members of an establishment that had oppressed people from the working-class background from which he had come.

Like a bottle surrounded by water, the story floated from day to day, from news bulletin to news bulletin, before crashing against the rocks of the jury's verdict at Jenkins' trial. Just as silence had filled the classroom all those years ago, silence preceded the words of the jury's chairman.

'Guilty as charged'.

Jenkins himself was not allowed to speak following the trial, but his solicitor did not hold back.

'This verdict is proof of the corruption inherent in our society. Today we have witnessed a grave injustice. Mr. Jenkins has asked me to appeal, and this is what I shall do, safe in the knowledge that true justice is on our side.'

That was the message, and it had been delivered on behalf of someone who was happy to intimidate others when he held the reins of power, but who had refused to say anything, when the tables were turned. Jenkins' message had not been delivered *in* a bottle, but it had been presented 'because of' a bottle, *for* 'a bottler', a true coward. Just as Jenkins' own obsession had moved from prepositions to propositions, those of the prosecuting counsel, Jenkins' fixation on prepositions assisted Adrian to make sense of what was happening.

'What goes around, comes around,' reflected Adrian, as the bottle which Jenkins had left spinning in his head, finally came to rest, pointing its finger of guilt firmly at Jenkins himself.