

CHRISTOPHER HOPE

Learning to Fly

Long ago, in the final days of the old regime, there lived a colonel who held an important job in the State Security Police and his name was Rocco du Preez. Colonel du Preez was in charge of the interrogation of political suspects and because of his effect on the prisoners of the old regime he became widely known in the country as "Window jumper" du Preez. After mentioning his name it was customary to add "thank God", because he was a strong man and in the dying days of the old regime everyone agreed that we needed a strong man. Now Colonel du Preez acquired his rather strange nickname not because he did any window jumping himself but rather because he had been the first to draw attention to this phenomenon which affected so many of the prisoners who were brought before him.

The offices of State Security were situated on the thirteenth floor of a handsome and tall modern block in the centre of town. Their high windows looked down on to a little dead-end street far below. Once this street had been choked with traffic and bustling with thriving shops. Then one day the first jumper landed on the roof of a car parked in the street and after that it was shut to traffic and turned into a pedestrian shopping mall. The street was filled in and covered over with crazy paving and one or two benches set up for weary shoppers. However, the jumpings increased. There were sometimes one or two a week and several nasty accidents on the ground began to frighten off the shoppers.

Whenever a jump had taken place the little street was cordoned off to allow in the emergency services: the police, the undertaker's men, the municipal workers brought in to hose down the area of impact which was often surprisingly large. The jumpings were bad for business and the shopkeepers grew desperate. The authorities were sympathetic and erected covered walk-ways running the length of the street leaving only the central area of crazy pavings and the benches, on which no one had ever been known to sit, exposed to the heavens; the walk-ways protected by their overhead concrete

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parapets were guaranteed safe against any and all flying objects. But still trade dwindled as one by one the shops closed, and the street slowly died and came to be known by the locals, who gave it a wide berth, as the "flying field".

As everyone knows, window jumpings increased apace over the years and being well placed to study them probably led Colonel Rocco du Preez to his celebrated thesis afterwards included in the manual of psychology used by recruits at the Police College and known as du Preez's Law. It states that all men, when brought to the brink, will contrive to find a way out if the least chance is afforded them and the choice of the means is always directly related to the racial characteristics of the individual in question. Some of du Preez's remarks on the subject have come down to us, though these are almost certainly apocryphal, as are so many tales of the final days of the old regime. "Considering your average white man," du Preez is supposed to have said, "my experience is that he prefers hanging - whether by pyjama cord, belt, strips of blankets; providing he finds the handy protuberance, the cell bars, say, or up-ended bedstead, you'll barely have turned your back and he'll be up there swinging from the light cord or some other chosen noose. Your white man in his last throes has a wonderful sense of rhythm - believe me, whatever you may have heard to the contrary - I've seen several Whites about to cough it and all of them have been wonderful dancers. Your Indian, now, he's something else, a slippery customer who prefers smooth surfaces. I've known Asians to slip and crack their skulls in a shower cubicle so narrow you'd have sworn a man couldn't turn in it. This innate slitheriness is probably what makes them good businessmen. Now, your Coloured, per contra, is more clumsy a character altogether. His hidden talent lies in his amazing lack of co-ordination. Even the most sober rogue can appear hopelessly drunk to the untrained eye. On the surface of things it might seem that you can do nothing with him; he has no taste for the knotted strip of blanket or the convenient bootlace; a soapy bathroom floor leaves him unmoved - yet show him a short, steep flight of steps and he instinctively knows what to do. When it comes to Africans I have found that they, perverse as always, choose another way out. They are given to window jumping. This phenomenon has been very widespread in the past few years. Personally, I suspect its roots go back a long way, back to their superstitions - i.e. to their regard for black magic and witchcraft. Everyone knows that in extreme instances your average blackie will believe anything; that his

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witchdoctors will turn the white man's bullets to water; or, if he jumps out of a window thirteen stories above terra firma he will miraculously find himself able to fly. Nothing will stop him once his mind's made up. I've seen up to six Bantu jump from a high window one day. Though the first landed on his head and the others saw the result they were not deterred. It's as if despite the evidence of their senses they believed that if only they could practise enough they would one day manage to take off."

"Window jumpin' " du Preez worked in an office sparsely furnished with an old desk, a chair, a strip of green, government-issue carpet, a very large steel cabinet marked "Secret" and a bare, fluorescent light in the ceiling. Poor though the furnishings were, the room was made light and cheerful by the large windows behind his desk and nobody remembers being aware of the meanness of the furnishings when Colonel du Preez was present in the room. When he sat down in his leather swivel chair behind his desk, witnesses reported that he seemed to fill up the room, to make it habitable, even genial. His reddish hair and green eyes were somehow enough to colour the room and make it complete. The eyes had a peculiar, steady glint to them. This was his one peculiarity. When thinking hard about something he had the nervous habit of twisting a lock of the reddish hair, a copper colour with gingery lights, in the words of a witness, around a finger. It was his only nervous habit. Since these were often the last words ever spoken by very brave men, we have to wonder at their ability to register details so sharply under terrible conditions; it is these details that provide us with our only glimpse of the man, as no photographs have come down to us.

It was to this office that three plainclothes men one day brought a new prisoner. The charge-sheet was singularly bare: it read simply, "Mpahlele ... Jake. Possession of explosives". Obviously they had got very little out of him. The men left closing the door softly, almost reverently, behind them.

The prisoner wore an old black coat, ragged grey flannels and a black beret tilted at an angle which gave him an odd, jaunty, rather continental look, made all the more incongruous by the fact that his hands were manacled behind him. Du Preez reached up with his desk ruler and knocked off the beret revealing a bald head gleaming in the overhead fluorescent light. It would have been shaved and polished, du Preez guessed, by one of the wandering barbers who traditionally gathered on Sundays down by the municipal lake, setting up three-legged stools and basins of water and hanging

towels and leather strops for their cut-throat razors from the lower branches of a convenient tree and draping their customers in large red and white check cloths, giving them little hand mirrors so that they could look on while the barbers scraped, snipped, polished and gossiped away the sunny afternoon by the water's edge beneath the tall bluegums. Clearly Mpahlele belonged to the old school of whom there were fewer each year as the fashion for Afro-wigs and strange woollen bangs took increasing hold among younger Blacks. Du Preez couldn't help warming to this just a little. After all, he was one of the old school himself in the new age of trimmers and amelonists. Mpahlele was tall, as tall as du Preez and, he reckoned, about the same age - though it was always difficult to tell with Africans. A knife scar ran from his right eye down to his collar, the flesh fused in a livid welt as if a tiny mole had burrowed under the black skin pushing up a furrow behind it. His nose had been broken, too, probably as the result of the same township fracas, and had mended badly turning to the left and then sharply to the right as if unable to make up its mind. The man was obviously a brawler. Mpahlele's dark brown eyes were remarkably calm - almost to the point of arrogance, du Preez thought for an instant, before dismissing the absurd notion with a tiny smile. It shocked him to see an answering smile on the prisoner's lips. However he was too old a hand to let this show.

"Where are the explosives?"

"I have no explosives," Mpahlele answered.

He spoke quietly but du Preez thought he detected a most unjustifiable calm amounting to confidence, or worse, to insolence, and he noted how he talked with special care. It was another insight. On his pad he wrote the letters MK. The prisoner's diction and accent betrayed him: Mission Kaffir. Raised at one of the stations by foolish clergy as though he was one day going to be a white man. Of course, the word "kaffir" was not a word in official use any longer. Like other names at that time growing less acceptable as descriptions of Africans: "native", "coon" and even "Bantu", the word had given way to softer names in an attempt to respond to the disaffection springing up among black people. But du Preez, as he told himself, was too old a dog to learn new tricks. Besides, he was not interested in learning to be more "responsive". He did not belong to the ameliorists. His job was to control disaffection and where necessary to put it down with proper force. And anyway, his notes were strictly for his own reference, private reminders of his first

impressions of a prisoner, useful when, and if, a second interview took place. The number of people he saw was growing daily and he could not expect to keep track of them all in his head.

Du Preez left his desk and slowly circled the prisoner. "Your comrade who placed the bomb in the shopping centre was a bungler. There was great damage. Many people were killed. Women and children among them. But he wasn't quick enough, your friend. The blast caught him too. Before he died he gave us your name. The paraffin tests show you handled explosives recently. I want the location of the cache. I want the make-up of your cell with names and addresses as well as anything else you might want to tell me."

"If the bomb did its business then the man was no bungler," Mphahlele said.

"The murder of women and children - no bungler?"

Mphahlele shrugged. "Casualties of war."

Du Preez circled him and stopped beside his night car. "I don't call the death of children war. I call it barbarism."

"Our children have been dying for years but we have never called it barbarism. Now we are learning. You and I know what we mean. I'm your prisoner of war. You will do whatever you can to get me to tell you things you want to know. Then you will get rid of me. But I will tell you nothing. So why don't you finish with me now? Save time." His brown eyes rested briefly and calmly on du Preez's empty chair, and then swept the room as if the man had said all he had to say and was now more interested in getting to know that notorious office.

A muscle in du Preez's cheek rippled and it took him a moment longer than he would have liked to bring his face back to a decent composure. Then he crossed to the big steel cabinet and opened it. Inside was the terrible, tangled paraphernalia of persuasion, the electric generator, the leads and electrodes, the salt water for sharpening contact and the thick leather straps necessary for restraining the shocked and writhing victim. At the sight of this he scored a point; he thought he detected a momentary pause, a faltering in the steady brown eyes taking stock of his office, and he talked to me after this treatment. "It's very seldom that people fail to talk to me after this treatment." He held up the electrodes. "The pain is intense."

In fact, as we know now, the apparatus in the cabinet was not that actually used on prisoners - indeed, one can see the same equipment on permanent exhibition in the national Museum of the

Revolution. Du Preez, in fact, kept it for effect. The real thing was administered by a special team in a soundproof room on one of the lower floors. But the mere sight of the equipment, whose reputation was huge among the townships and shanty towns, was often enough to have the effect of loosening stubborn tongues. However, Mphahlele looked at the tangle of wires and straps as if he wanted to include them in his inventory of the room and his expression suggested not fear but rather - and this du Preez found positively alarming - a hint of approval. There was nothing more to be said. He went back to his desk, pressed the buzzer and the plainclothes men came in and took Mphahlele downstairs.

Over the next twenty-four hours "Window jumpin'" du Preez puzzled over his new prisoner. It was a long time before he put his finger on some of the qualities distinguishing this man from others he'd worked with under similar circumstances. Clearly, Mphahlele was not frightened. But then other men had been brave too - for a while. It was not only bravery, one had to add to it the strange fact that this man quite clearly did not hate him. That was quite alarming: Mphahlele had treated him as if they were truly equals. There was an effrontery about this he found maddening and the more he thought about it, the more he raged inside. He walked over to the windows behind his desk and gazed down to the dead little square with its empty benches and its crazy paving which, with its haphazard joins where the stones were cemented one to the next into nonsensical, snaking patterns, looked from the height of the thirteenth storey as if a giant had brought his foot down hard and the earth had shivered into a thousand pieces. He was getting angry. Worse, he was letting his anger cloud his judgment. Worse still, he didn't care.

Mphahlele was in a bad way when they brought him back to du Preez. His face was so bruised that the old knife scar was barely visible, his lower lip was bleeding copiously and he swayed when the policemen let him go and might have fallen had he not grabbed the edge of the desk and hung there swaying. In answer to du Preez's silent question the interrogators shook their heads. "Nothing. He never said *nothing*."

Mphahlele had travelled far in the regions of pain and it had changed him greatly. It might have been another man who clung to du Preez's desk with his breath coming in rusty pants; his throat was choked with phlegm or blood he did not have the strength to cough away. He was bent and old and clearly on his last legs. One eye was puffed up in a great swelling shot with green and purple bruises, but

the other, he noticed with a renewed spurt of anger, though it had trouble focusing, showed the same old haughty gleam when he spoke to the man.

"Have you any more to tell me about your war?"

Mpahlele gathered himself with a great effort, his one good eye flickering wildly with the strain. He licked the blood off his lips and wiped it from his chin. "We will win," he said, "soon."

Du Preez dismissed the interrogators with a sharp nod and they left his presence by backing away to the door, full of awe at his control. When the door closed behind them he stood up and regarded the swaying figure with its flickering eye. "You are like children," he said bitterly, "and there is nothing we can do for you."

"Yes," said Mpahlele, "we are your children. We owe you everything."

Du Preez stared at him. But there was not a trace of irony to be detected. The madman was quite plainly sincere in what he said and du Preez found that insufferable. He moved to the windows and opened them. It was now that, so the stories go, he made his fateful remark. "Well, if you won't talk, then I suppose you had better learn to fly."

What happened next is not clear except in broad outline even today, the records of the old regime which were to have been made public have unaccountably been reclassified as secret, but we can make an informed guess. Legend then says that du Preez recounted for his prisoner his "theory of desperate solutions" and that, exhausted though he was, Mpahlele showed quickening interest in the way out chosen by white men - that is to say, dancing. We know this is true because du Preez told the policemen waiting outside the door when he joined them in order to allow Mpahlele to do what he had to do. After waiting a full minute, du Preez entered his office again closing the door behind him, alone, as had become customary in such cases, his colleagues respecting his need for a few moments of privacy before moving on to the next case. Seconds later these colleagues heard a most terrible cry. When they rushed into the room they found it was empty.

Now we are out on a limb. We have no more facts to go on. All is buried in obscurity or say, rather, it is buried with du Preez who plunged from his window down to the landing field at the most horrible speed, landing on his head. Jake Mpahlele has never spoken of his escape from Colonel "Window jumpin'" du Preez. All we have are the stories. Some firmly believe to this day that it was

done by a special magic and Mpahlele had actually learnt to fly and that the colonel on looking out of his window was so jealous at seeing a black man swooping in the heavens that he had plunged after him on the supposition, regarded as axiomatic in the days of the old regime, that anything a black man could do, a white man could do ten times better. Others, more sceptical, said that the prisoner had hidden himself in the steel cabinet with the torture equipment and emerged to push du Preez to hell and then escaped in the confusion you will get in a hive if you kill the queen bee. All that is known for sure is that du Preez lay on the landing field like wet clothes fallen from a washing line, terribly twisted and leaking everywhere. And that in the early days of the new regime Jake Mpahlele was appointed chief investigating officer in charge of the interrogation of suspects and that his work with political prisoners, especially white prisoners, was soon so widely respected that he won rapid promotion to the rank of colonel and became known throughout the country as Colonel Jake "Dancin'" Mpahlele, and after his name it was customary to add "thank God", because he was a strong man and in the early days of the new regime everyone agreed we needed a strong man.

Acknowledgements

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). Born in London, Virginia Woolf was one of the central figures in the Bloomsbury Group, a collection of artists and philosophers who challenged Victorian realism and establishment values. Her novels include *The Waves* (1931) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

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Learning to Fly

Footnotes

regime: government, administration

interrogation: questioning

customary: usual, routine

phenomenon: occurrence, strange trend

thriving: successful

cordoned off: roped off

dwindled: grew less

celebrated: famous

thesis: theory, argument

brink: edge

contrive: manage

means: method

apocryphal: legendary, mythical

protuberance: something sticking out

throes: convulsion, struggles

cough it: slang for die

innate: inborn, natural

lack: absence, shortfall

perverse: contrary, stubborn, headstrong

terra firma: latin for solid ground

deterred: put off

sparsely: sparingly, thinly

genial: friendly, pleasant

peculiarity: strange feature or habit

glimpse: quick look

reverently: respectfully, with a sense of worship

jaunty: cheerful, lively

continental: foreign, usually referring to the continent of europe

incongruous: out of place, appearing strange
manacled: chained
'old school': traditional values from the past
ameliorist: people who are trying to modernize or upgrade things
fracas: fight
brawler: street fighter
arrogance: conceit, feeling of superiority
unjustifiable: not warranted or supported by the situation or facts
insolence: disrespect, cheek
diction: phrasing, sentence structure
disaffection: disillusionment, dissatisfaction, restlessness
bungler: fool someone who makes mistakes
cache: store, hoard
casualties: victims
barbarism: savagery, wildness, uncivilized
notorious: well known, usually for something bad
composure: control
paraphernalia: equipment, bits and pieces
writhing: twisting (in pain)
faltering: hesitation
distinguishing: differentiating, identifying
effrontery: impudence, confidence
copiously: plentifully, a lot
haughty: proud
irony: sarcasm
detected: found out, noticed
sincere: genuine, truthful
insufferable: highly irritating, unbearable
unaccountably: mysteriously
'out on a limb': in an uncertain place: in this context, unsure of the facts
obscurity: darkness: in this context, uncertainty, confusion

supposition: assumption, belief

axiomatic: obvious, self evident, not to be questioned

skeptical: doubtful, unbelieving

Before you read

Much of Hope's writing is described as satire, because it uses a mocking tone of dark humour to comment on aspects of the political system. In this story the historical and political context is central. It is set in the days of the apartheid regime when political prisoners often never came back from interrogations by the security police, and were said to have died through various 'accidents' in the notorious John Vorster Square security headquarters. Hope originally sub-titled this story 'An African Fairy Tale'. When you read the story, think about what its style (for example, look at the opening and the ending) might have in common with a 'fairy tale', and how this links into the satirical tone.

INSERT STORY

Questions and activities

1. The apartheid theory of racial difference is set out in Colonel 'Window Jumpin' du Preez 'celebrated thesis' that '... all men, when brought to the brink, will contrive to find a way out if the least chance is afforded to them and the choice of the means is always directly related to the racial characteristics of the individual in question'.

In what ways does the story itself poke fun at this idea? (Look, for example, at the way in which du Preez unfolds his theory, or at various hints in the narrative that suggest what really goes on.)

What do these techniques suggest about the theme and style of the story?

2. Talking about his theory, Du Preez says at one point: 'Everyone knows that in extreme instances your average blackie will believe anything...'

Compare this to one of the theories about du Preez's death, that '.... Mpahlele had actually learnt to fly and that the colonel on looking out of his window was so jealous at seeing a black man swooping in the heavens that he had plunged after him on the supposition, regarded as axiomatic in the days of the old regime, that anything a black man could do, a white man could do ten times better.'

What is the writer saying about people's beliefs?

3. The relationship between the two men is built up mainly through du Preez' eyes. Look at some of these extracts:

'du Preez thought he detected a most unjustifiable calm amounting to confidence, or worse, to insolence..';

'his expression suggested not fear but rather – and this du Preez found positively alarming – a hint of approval'.

'... this man quite clearly did not hate him. That was quite alarming: Mpahlele had treated him as if they were truly equals.'

Go through the text and add other examples which give us insight into the two men. What effect does Mpahlele have on du Preez? Why does he find Mpahlele 'insufferable'?

4. "The abuse of political power not only harms its victims, but also invites them in."

What is your opinion on this view of the theme of the story? Think about the following.

- The points you made for Question 3 above.
- What Mpahlele means when he says "We are your children. We owe you everything".
- Analyse the last paragraph of the story. How does it compare to the opening of the story? What does it suggest about the theme? How does the structure of the story support the theme?