

Tweet-Tweet

by

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(2600 words)

There it was again, Tuk – Tuk – Tuk - a drumming at the bottom of the garden. But to professor Ronald Carrington's dismay, it was not the cardinal woodpecker but that odious estate agent - what was her name again?

“Hullo, professor,” a cheery voice at the other side of the shrubbery. A willowy tall blonde with the looks of a fashion model with a raised hammer. “You know me prof, Elaine from Galaxy Estates?”

He hoped glowering at the pesky woman would convey he didn't appreciate the noisy intrusion on a weekend afternoon, but she didn't seem to notice.

“I'm putting up a TO LET notice on your neighbours' wall, professor. The Thompson's have left for Perth, didn't they tell you?”

So the capricious ingrates had decided to bugger off to Australia? Good riddance. There had been odious confrontations with the Thompsons – with Mrs T. especially. Bird crap over everything, like someone whitewashed Mr T's car, a podgy finger waving under his nose, as if he were also responsible for the feral pigeons streaking her washing hanging out to dry; and wet hadeda shit, for Christ's sake, on their *stoep* - she could have slipped and done herself a serious injury. (Why hadn't she?) There was also that sordid business of the unsightly concrete wall erected between their mutual properties without his permission, topped with – horrors upon horrors – bird spikes! As if their elaborate electric fence in the front wasn't bad enough.

“They’re not bird spikes,” shrieked Mrs Thompson. “They’re people spikes. This country is going to Hell in a bread basket, professor. Crime. Crime. And more crime. Do you want to live like that?” Professor Carrington hadn’t been in the mood to be conciliatory. He’d see the Thompsons in court.

“Well, I hope you find suitable tenants.” the professor growled at the estate agent before turning to go. “I don’t want riff-raff next door. This is a respectable neighbourhood. And no cats, dogs, or kids.” Yes, the last thing he wanted was ill-disciplined kids and their equally ill-mannered parents and animals. He had never been tempted by the thought of a cat or dog, cats especially. He stalked off.

Smiling Elaine watched him go. Clients like the professor came with the job, and never mind his bad breath and egomania, something of a comic eccentric. “Let me know if you ever think of selling, professor?” she called after him.

The professor raised a hand and without turning, gave her the middle finger.

From his patio professor Ronald Carrington looked back over his garden down to the street, now obscured by shrubbery. He felt his heart swell with pride. How he loved the sunbirds that came to probe for nectar in the protea flowers; the mossies building untidy nests in the Sweet Thorn. A highly vocal group of white-eyes were cavorting upside down, hopping from branch to branch in the Bristle Bush. He cupped an ear to the repeated call of an African goshawk somewhere high up above looking for gullible turtle doves. All this, plants, birds, and sounds were familiar and reassuring to him. Yes, he enjoyed his garden; a miniature Kirstenbosch. What more did he want? He went in through the French doors to his study where the unwelcome red eye on the answering machine was blinking.

“Ron. It’s Clare. I think we have a few things to talk about. Could we - “

He jabbed erase. Clare Finch had taken to calling him, Ron. No one had called him Ron since junior school. Next it would be, Ronnie? He’d taken her home one evening after a club meeting. She’d asked him in for a coffee. He declined. She closed the car door with lowered eyes, mouth pinched in a straight line. “See you Sunday at the AGM then Ron?” He had driven off leaving her standing without giving an answer. He had nothing personal against Clare Finch, a divorcee of fifty-two, with stringy short blonde hair mostly out of a bottle. Just overbearing.

He opened the liquor cabinet and poured himself a stiff shot of single malt, his usual sundowner, and crossed to his favourite easy chair.

Professor Ronald Carrington had never married. He lived in a quiet *cul-de-sac* in one of the better, leafy suburbs of Cape Town within easy driving distance of the university. Academia and research had been his life. The extinct Dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*) which was once thought only to have inhabited the island of Mauritius; that is until his sensational discovery in the Karoo of a Dodo fossilized egg. His fame in the *world of birds* had been assured.

Shortly after the discourse with the pesky estate agent the professor left for Johannesburg to deliver a paper on the migration of white storks from northern Jutland to the Western Cape. He was gone for two weeks. On his return he did what he always did on a Sunday morning. Still clad in pyjamas he went about the garden with a steaming mug of coffee, a pair of 8x36 binoculars around his neck looking to his various commitments: the larvae of the beetles of the genus *Tenebrio* which supplied the mealworms for the garden birds; inspecting the big wooden box, built exactly to his specifications: 90 x 60 x 40 centimetres, for the composting red worms *Eisenia fetida*. He was happy and alone, incontestable proof he would always remain a lifelong bachelor.

Suddenly! The unmistakable shrill cry from the other side of the spiked fence of someone in distress.

“H-e-e-e-l-p. Help. Come quick. Heeelp.” A woman!

Oh, dear! Oh, dear! And he was in pyjamas. What should he do? ”What’s wrong?” He shouted back, spilling coffee over his pyjamas..

“Come quick. Not got remote for gate,” came the foreign sounding reply.

No remote? How the bloody hell did she expect him to reach her? Climb over the wall – it had people spikes?

Professor Ronald Carrington had long given up considering himself young. He would be sixty next birthday. But he was resourceful. Snatching up a mattress from the patio recliner he threw it across the spikes. Then using the garden table to stand on feeling a little foolish hoisted a leg up as if mounting a horse. Then he was tumbling on the other side, pulling a tendon, skinning a knee, banging his head on the drainpipe. But he was over the spikes, if not a little bloodied, but escaping certain emasculation, not that anyone would be any the wiser? So much for keeping the criminal element out?

On all fours he looked up to see her standing by the plunge pool – waiting for him. Petite, dainty looking, with hair as black and shiny as a widowbird's wing framing a lovely heart-shaped face and almond eyes to perfection. Chinese? Korean? Japanese? Oriental people all looked the same. She was in bare feet shaking like a leaf. He climbed shakily to his feet aware he'd lost a slipper. With shock the professor realized, like him, she must have only just got out of bed clad in some kind of flimsy see-through oriental bedroom attire; a silk robe with dragons and entwining tails and plunging neckline. Professor Ronald Carrington hadn't seen many half naked women before, in fact none at all he could remember, or so long ago now it might have been in another life.

“In there.” She said pointing. “In there. Look.”

Moving around her cautiously he peered in through the open French shutters into an ensuite bedroom overlooking the plunge pool. Just the ruffled double bed, recently slept in. He swung his head to-and-fro expecting the worst. No dead bodies from what he could see.. No one floating face down in the pool.

“A bird,” she insisted. “Look.”

So that's what the fuss was all about? *Another unfortunate case of Ornithophobia!* There sat a Cape robin-chat in its lovely orangey hues and white eyebrows. With a bit of coaching professor Carrington gently shooed it out of the bedroom. A remote lay nearby on the bed-stand. He picked it up to give to her, aware he was limping.

“You're bleeding,” she said, her face expressionless.

Without another word she turned on bare feet and disappeared inside the house leaving him standing, bewildered. Moments later she returned with a porcelain bowl of delicately painted blue and gold colours filled with warm scented water, on top of which floated rose petals. Putting the bowl down to one side she pointed to the bed indicating he must sit, then rolling up his pyjama pants and sleeves began to wash his hands and feet, but not before massaging each finger individually. With soothing gentleness she sucked on his big toe too. She did all this in silence. Just as well. The professor was speechless, something that hadn't happened to him in a long while. Finished at last she sat back, looked up and said: "You're the birdman, Mister Tweet-Tweet," and smiled.

When Professor Ronald Carrington returned to his own house, by way of the front gate this time, he knew something irrevocably had happened at the neighbour's house to alter his life for ever. He was not quite sure what just yet? She was a foreigner, her English wasn't too good. She had called him, Tweet-Tweet, out of a Tom and Jerry comic book? (That pesky estate agent had put her up to it, he was sure?) He'd forgive her for listening to that obnoxious woman. He was on a euphoric high. Even the bang on his forehead felt better. Pity he hadn't asked her name. But they were neighbours. Not like the Thompsons.

In the following days the professor noticed cars pull up outside the neighbour's house; leave again sometime later, when another car would inevitably arrive. Her hours were often long, going well into the evening. She was working from home, he surmised: Aromatherapy, acupuncture, reflexology for which Oriental people were well known. Hadn't she already demonstrated her skills so superbly on him?

The more the professor thought about his new neighbour the more interesting she became; he wanted to know more about her. She had become an obsession. He knew all about obsessions, knew how it could rob you of everything. But he could bend. He was prepared to be patient, wait as only a bird watcher knew how, and he was sure in the end his patience would be rewarded. Pity she didn't like birds? But that was still something he could teach her.

Once or twice he used a ladder in the spare bedroom to climb up where he could look into the neighbour's house. He would pause on the way up to glance at himself in the full length mirror on the wall, noting his greying hair, lined face; tortoise shell glasses; a distinguished look, as one of his female students once told him. From his position on the ladder he could sometimes see the back of her head in the window nodding vigorously. (At something one of her client's had just said?) On another occasion he climbed into the lower branches of the wild peach until his old bones protested and he fell out, which required seven stitches to his brow. A few of her clients' cars had become familiar; one a midnight blue Lexus with tinted

windows. She would come out to the car, spend a few minutes talking to the driver who wore a black fedora, and then the Lexus would drive off.

On the last Friday of August, two days before the end of the month, he was in his study sitting in his favourite easy chair preparing to listen to some Mendelsohn when he noticed the answering machine's winking red light. There were three new messages. Damn!

“Professor – it's Elaine from Galaxy Estates here. Have you – “

The pesky estate agent was gone with one swift touch of the erase button. The next voice leapt out at him, breathless, wound-up, shot through with existential angst.

“Ron. This is Clare Finch. I've had a drink, I know, but I'm not going to apologise. I have something to say, Ron ...” There was a long pause, some snuffling at the other end. “Have you been away? I've left messages....” More snuffling. “You won't allow anything, anyone, into your life, Ron. Is this what you really want, Ronnie?”

The machine cut her off. Maybe his finger slipped?

The third and last message was from his nephew, Darren Carrington.

“Hi there Uncle. I'm leaving next week for that big city up north. Before I go how about meeting me for luncheon at Kirstenbosch? I know how you love birds – the feathered variety, of course. Ha, ha. Call me.”

He leaned back in his easy chair. His nephew appeared to be a worldly wise young man if his numerous girlfriends and affairs at university were anything to go by. He could talk to him about his neighbour. There was something puzzling him.

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“It’s quite obvious,” said Darren. “She’s a hooker.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“H-O-O-K-E-R, uncle.” Spelling it out as if to a child with a learning problem. “Not a hoopoe, or hadeda, or yellow-billed hornbill. Hooker.”

“I know quite well what a prostitute is, Darren – I mean - that is,” he coughed into his wine. “I can’t speak from experience, unlike you it would appear?”

“I don’t think my girlfriend would like to hear you say that, uncle.”

The professor emptied his glass in a gulp, picked up the wine bottle and refilled it, but not without spilling on his neatly pressed grey slacks. There were grins on the faces of the elderly couple at the opposite table as he took a serviette to wipe his crotch.

“I understood prostitutes wore short skirts, stood under street lamps, waiting -” he said lamely, “for sailors.”

“Where’re you from uncle?” Said Darren lifting the wine bottle and filling his own glass. “It’s all up-market today; for the more mature, moneyed gentlemen. Less aggressive.” Darren leaned forward on his elbows. A smirk on his face. He cupped a hand to his mouth: “I’d say you’d fall into that category nicely Uncle Ronald?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Master Card. Visa. American Express.”

Professor Ronald Carrington felt his world sliding away. She was a reflexologist, or some other *ologist*, wasn't she? He'd have to confront her now. But what if it wasn't true? She would take umbrage, for sure, and quite rightly so. How embarrassing? Possibly threaten to leave the neighbourhood, maybe the country when South Africa was crying out for people like her with specialized skills, not like those leaches the Thompsons. He looked about sadly. Kirstenbosch was so lovely at this time of the year. The daisies and the *vygies* in full bloom. He saw the mountain lift to where it touched the sky. You can start here, stop, look left, right, back, there's always the mountains. Sometimes he wished he had been born a verreaux eagle and soar above it all. There was a verreaux eagle soaring over Devil's Peak now.

She was waiting for him at the top of the path by the front door two lemon trees in terracotta pots on either side of the steps. She was wearing six inch high stilettos dressed in a long Mandarin gown of brightly coloured silk with slits up each side from ankle to thigh. She cocked her head on one side, a piece of dark hair falling across a cheek.

"I-It's your neighbour, professor – " *What the Hell! Say it:* "It's me, Tweet-Tweet." It's true, he thought. Oriental women do have inscrutable faces.

He reached into his jacket pocket, took out his wallet.

"Do you take a Master card?"

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