Agata Tomažič: Ushabti

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

All characters and events in this book
are fictitious, any resemblance to actual
events or persons is coincidental

1

When Robert Obrh received a message from his boss instructing him to go to some apartment building to investigate the disappearance of the ladder that led to the attic, he initially thought his superior was making fun of him. It would have been out of character – the boss was not the kind of person who would joke very often. On the other hand, Robert was, without doubt, the kind of person colleagues would poke fun at. And he was well aware of this. Lanky, always with an unfortunate haircut – probably due to his strange, egg-shaped head – and a glum face, he looked like some tragicomic cartoon character.

He also moved in a disjointed, even clumsy manner, especially when he was under pressure or in a hurry to get somewhere. He was not completely hopeless with regards to his physical abilities – he was a moderate fan of sports and he had, after all, finished his police training. This certainly requires some motor coordination, even leaving brain development aside. In Robert's case, this too could be questioned because of his distinctly slow speech. Perhaps it was due to this, weary of pitiful glances, that he took a taciturn stance when it came to communication. When he did speak, despite the difficulty with which words rolled from his mouth, they carried weight.

His woebegone appearance often had positive consequences: he instilled trust in people quickly and rendered in them a desire to share their deepest secrets, in this way letting him know that not everything was so terrible, that they too are not perfect. When it came to qualities for a criminal investigator, all this could be seen as an asset...

But what is this about some ladder? Robert had thought for a while as to whether he should openly confront his boss. Finally tell him what he should have said before. That he will

no longer be his flunky simply because he is clumsy, speaks slowly, is not handsome and does not run marathons like Taras Birsa. He can find someone else for that! Then he looked around his office. It was not exactly spacious and the feeling of being cramped in a small space was exacerbated due to the old dark chipboard furniture. The grey lino on the floor was worn, in places even had holes in it with traces cigarette butts that had burned in the hands of his predecessors in times when smoking in enclosed spaces was still acceptable. Standing on the desk was an old computer, an off-white box with a cheap monitor of dubious origin and a huge keyboard where many of the keys were worn beyond legibility, accumulated in the gaps in between them were traces of his snack lunches of the last week. Not week, month, probably even a year. How long has he been working here? Robert stretched out his hand and touched the keyboard. Whatever he thought of his boss and his quirky sense of humour, he could not ignore the fact that jobs these days don't grow on trees. Times are hard, he needs to pay child support for his two sons and the mortgage on his flat... Besides this, work was not too bad – after all, he does have his own office. His computer may be old and worn, but it connects to the internet, meaning he can check out the dLib site any time he wants, browsing through all kinds of publications that have been added to the National Digital Library platform. He reads articles from old newspapers, amused by the adverts for products his colleagues didn't even know existed. He reads books about forgotten heroes from other times. He chooses to transport himself into a different era, choosing the people he hangs out with who tell him wonderful and exciting stories of their adventures, without expecting anything from him, only to listen.

An additional advantage is that he is alone in the office. None of this could happen were he forced to be with someone else, constantly glancing over his shoulders or, even worse, wanting to talk with him all the time. Even the mere thought of such a possibility made Robert shudder. He knew that this would eventually mean he would have to work.

No, work is not that terrible, in fact it is quite fine. After all, he has a great time. His fingers slid across the keyboard, carefully and gently, as if stroking a furry, soft but unpredictable cat he does not want to wake up. At least not now. Not yet...

Grabbing the receiver of his landline, he dialled his boss's internal number.

'Good morning. What is it with this ladder? When did it disappear, who reported its disappearance?'

‘Good morning, Obrh! Nice to hear you. This is something big, you see. I would not entrust just anybody with it, but you seem to be the man to handle it! Listen, this is a truly monumental issue and...’

The boss was carefully enunciating his words as if he were a foreign language teacher speaking especially clearly and at the same time enthusiastically listening to the sound of his received pronunciation. Yes, his boss was one of those people who love the sound of their own voice.

What surprised Robert with all this talking was that he did not burst out laughing. He felt as if he had switched on a teleshopping channel. Only that he was not deciding which product to buy or not to buy. Worse, he could not even switch channels. With one hand he seized the edge of the desk as if looking for some support on a ship being tossed about in rough seas, with the other he clenched the receiver even harder. Then he slowly began to move it away from his ear.

‘The disappearance was reported this morning by Dr Vladimir Baumgarten. But we cannot exclude the possibility that the ladder was removed some time earlier, for the doctor has just returned from a week-long trip to the seaside. To his holiday home in Croatia.’

‘So you are telling me he has an alibi?’

‘Alibi? Obrh, do you think I am a fool?! Of course he has an alibi! Why would this elderly gentleman steal his own ladder and then call the police? Do you even know who Dr Baumgarten is?’

‘The surname sound familiar…’

‘He was called the ‘Yugoslav Christiaan Barnard’, does that say anything to you? Dr Baumgarten was one of our most successful heart surgeons! You are aware that a man like him would not call the General Police Directorate and report a stolen attic ladder if in doing so he did not want inform us of something big? Something he does not dare call by its name, instead using a code? Do you get it now? Do you not comprehend the honour that has befallen you to be able to investigate the disappearance of the ladder in the very apartment building where Dr Baumgarten lives? Can you not see that in assigning this case to you I am showing you a lot of trust? That I am basically giving you one last chance? One last chance before you are sent back to the traffic police! Obrh, do you realise that in the last ten years you have not solved a single case I have given you?! Not one! You are an embarrassment to us all! To the criminal investigators, and also...'

Robert had already put the receiver down on the table. His fingers found their own way to the keyboard. He pressed the keys slowly and softly, so the boss would not hear him typing away. This was his only protection from the barrage of insults that were thrown at him. *Journey on the White River based on the original manuscripts of the vicar-general for Africa, Dr Ignatius Knoblecher, complied by and had rendered into Slovene by V.F. Klun*. His gaze moved across the words slowly and reverently, as if he was reading holy texts. He syllabised the occasional word out loud to himself, amazed at how it sounded. How familiar it must have been to readers a century and a half ago, now so unusual, barely comprehensible. Yet it still has immense power, for the power that words have does not diminish over the years. Words can still take the reader far away. Close their eyes, their ears, allow them to forget everything around them, even themselves. Rise like a screen between him and the outside world. Protect him from attacks. Attacks he received not only from his boss but also his wife. When she was not yet his ex-wife.

Lovingly and carefully he moved his mouse to the scrollbar on the website, as if turning the pages of an actual paper book. The thundering constantly coming from the phone receiver during all this had long become mere white noise.

'Obrh, now please, concentrate! Are you even listening to what I am saying?!'

'Yes, of course,' Robert sighed.

'I certainly hope so! Because Baumgarten is not just anybody! One of the most famous surgeons around! For a while he was even Marshal Tito's personal doctor, apparently even went sailing with him on the presidential yacht Galeb! It was Baumgarten who operated on him just before he died!'

'Operated on him? I thought you said he was a heart surgeon? Wasn't Tito's last operation a leg amputation? Why would he need a heart surgeon…?'

'Obrh, you're an idiot! You are the greatest idiot among crime investigators ever! I will escort you in person back to the traffic police! Even if, by some miracle, you manage to successfully solve this case, you should know that you will never get promotion to senior crime investigator! Not while I am your boss, I swear…'

Robert had already put the receiver back on the desk and was immersed in the travels of Ignatius Knoblecher. He liked many aspects about him but were someone to force him to tell the truth about what it was that turned him to reading this text he would have to admit that it was not merely an interest in the adventures and discoveries in a part of Africa

where until then no white man had set foot but that the famous vicar and his life attracted him on account of a single, rather banal fact: he too had been born in Škocjan. Škocjan near Mokronog, a tiny village in back of beyond Lower Carniola. Both Robert's and Knoblehar's parents were uneducated; the vicar's parents probably completed their schooling with a mere proof of literacy. Knoblehar's father might have added calculation to this, for he owned a pub and a butchery – it was thanks to this that he could send his curious and clever son to study. And, like Robi a hundred and fifty years later, the young Ignac bade farewell to his childhood home forever, following his thirst for knowledge. First to secondary school in Rudolfswerth, then to study theology, initially in Ljubljana and later Rome. Rome was his springboard for missions in the Near East until he felt his true calling, into Africa, into Sudan. The rest is history and Robert was very well aware that the only thing he and his famous compatriot had in common was that they spent their childhood in the same village. Compared to Knoblehar's discoveries, achievements and acts of genuine human kindness, Robert's existence was entirely wasted and insignificant. On the threshold of middle age, it was also pretty obvious to him that this is how it would remain. Yet in moments of despair he still turned to Knoblehar, whose life gave hope and allowed the possibility of dreaming that miracles do happen. That the road from Škocjan leads all the way to Khartoum. And that even the son of simple parents can anticipate an audience with the Pope.

The noise coming from the receiver had in the meantime reached an unbelievable volume; the boss's yelling was entering Robert's consciousness as a particularly annoying alarm clock weaves itself into dreams. He sighed, took his eyes off the screen, grabbed the phone.

'Did you get that? Are you even listening?!'

'Yes, I'm listening, Boss.'

'Dr Vladimir Baumgarten had operated on Tito before all the complications that led to his leg amputation occurred, and then he died! Not because of the amputation! Well, he will explain it all to you. Dr Baumgarten extended our Marshal's life by a few months at least! This is not general knowledge, few people know about it. But this was a key period, many things happened in those few months that changed the course of history. I know about the procedure because my old man worked at the University Hospital at the time and knew Baumgarten personally. They were friends… And I am sharing this information with you because I think it could be important for your investigation! Go now and ask the doctor what he meant about this ladder! He is over eighty but is still very much with it. I don't know

whether he still lectures at the Medical Faculty, but he used to do that too. He had the title of Emeritus Professor. And he is a wonderful narrator, listening to him is a pleasure, you'll see. Go now, I have given you this case as a prize, because I still have some hope left for you…'

2

Dr Vladimir Baumgarten lived in one of those elegant, solidly built residential blocks that were constructed just after the end of the Second World War. Rumour had it that they were built by German prisoners of war and local political detainees. Robert had never been entirely convinced by such claims. He found it unlikely that the Party would allow anything like that: German POWs mingling with local dissidents, even if through work.

The façade was somewhat darkened due to decades of exhaust fumes blowing from the road along which the new building had been erected. Initially this meant only the cars of the privileged few from the ruling ranks, then the river of traffic increased and almost every citizen had their own vehicle. The metal boxes changed shape, even what made them move underwent changes, from petrol to electricity. The building, however, stood there, high and steadfast. With a certain arrogance and distance it looked out onto passing vehicles and watched people entering it. It was obvious that it was old, but it drew its self-confidence from a certain nobility it had gained through its age and regular maintenance. The traces of this were clearly visible, one such intervention was the replacement of all the window frames. It seemed that the residents had wisely and thoughtfully followed the original plans and had new wooden windows with roller blinds installed. Not quite everyone, Robert discovered: the immaculate restoration was spoiled by a few white plastic window frames in the basement. He bent over to take a closer look. First he noticed the embroidered curtains hanging from a rail halfway up the window, clearly in an attempt to prevent curious passersby from looking inside. Entirely pointless. On the inside shelf of the window but this side of the curtain, visible to everyone, was a row of cacti in flowerpots. Next to them an ashtray full of cigarette butts – Robert pulled a face in disgust. He extended his neck to peek inside. He could see a kitchen table and chairs, a sofa next to the wall. This was not some basement for storing potatoes, skis and bicycles, but a proper flat. Robert felt embarrassed, peering like this into other people's lives. He straightened up immediately as if he had been

caught looking through a keyhole. He had to remind himself that he is, after all, a criminal investigator, this is his job.

There were three steps leading up to the main entrance into the building. The front door was a work of art in itself: double leaf with carved figures doing various tasks. The artist had probably wanted to represent various members of the working class. Robert slowly slid his fingers across the relief design. It felt like touching an artwork on display in a museum and he was surprised the door had not yet been stolen – in the part of town he came from this was common practice; guttering at least tended to vanish on more than one occasion in the middle of the night. Without doubt, a door like this could be flogged on the black market, he thought to himself.

The entrance itself was, by all measures, monumental, but this was almost completely lost by the reality that surrounded it: out on the pavement in front of it was a carelessly parked car. A huge German SUV. Almost certainly the doctor's, Robert thought to himself; he probably has difficulty walking at his age and parks right next to the entrance. Ignoring the fact it provides access. But, considering his age, he could understand this and forgive him. Then he checked the doorbell panel. It gave only six surnames and the sign with the fancily engraved name 'Baumgarten' was in the top row. So the doctor lives right at the top? Robert rang the bell and waited until the door opened and then he began walking up the stairs. There were only two floors in the building but when he reached the top of the second flight of stairs, he felt as if he had climbed four. In front of him was a single door. Once he had looked around he noticed a second, smaller door. But this was high up, under the ceiling – probably leading into the attic. Under that door were two small metal hooks which seemed to be there for the ladder. While it was still here. Until it disappeared. Until somebody took it away? Stole it? Or did it set off to explore the world on its own? It occurred to Robert that his boss perhaps does not consider him so very incapable and certainly no longer sees him as a flunkey he can send off without feeling any guilt to an entirely fruitless informative interview with some demented, probably half-mad old man. To a man who might once have been in the highest echelons of society but whose main distinction today was that he was the personal friend of his boss's father.

Dr Vladimir Baumgarten opened the door wearing a white linen shirt and light blue linen trousers. This in itself would not be unusual, after all, it was summer and in the heat rational people have long worn light linen clothing. But Dr Baumgarten wore them differently to other people. He wore them with a mixture of patronage and benevolence that gave him

the air of some proud owner of a coffee plantation somewhere in the highlands of Kenya. Someone who this time happened to open the door himself but would normally have one of his hundreds of servants do. With his small frameless glasses and a curious, piercing gaze, he seemed like a cross between Arthur C Clarke and David Attenborough, Robert, a fan of documentaries, thought to himself.

'Baumgarten,' the old man mumbled in a vaguely unfriendly tone and extended his hand in greeting.

'Robert Obrh,' Robert replied. He then fell silent for a moment, as if there had been some kind of technical glitch in his pre-recorded greeting address, but the track eventually played to the end. '…criminal investigator,' he added. He wondered whether to relay him his job title, not wanting to sound like a braggart, but in the end his honesty prevailed: the man should know he is merely an investigator, not a senior investigator. A lump formed in his throat and he had to make an effort to swallow the fresh bitterness.

He then began looking round the space he had just entered. Not merely as a crime investigator whose curiosity is part of his job. This time he admitted to himself, that first and foremost, his curiosity was that of someone who cannot hide their enthusiasm over what they have so far seen and wants to see more. It was like stepping into a museum. Or at least into a library. The huge room with an ancient panoramic window was filled with books, paintings and all kinds of other artwork. It seemed the doctor's apartment on the top floor of the building was in fact two flats combined. The height of the ceiling was way above the standard construction for working people. The walls shone in a light creamy colour, with an enormous cream leather sofa ruling over the space from a special plinth in the middle of the room. In front of it was a low table with a chequered marble surface. One of the walls was entirely taken over by a bookcase with books in double rows on some shelves, piled one on top of another in some. The only place Robert had seen anything like this before was in the Archbishopric Archive, where he had gained access on the pretence that he was looking for a document essential for solving a crime. And they had believed him. In fact, he was researching his own family tree but unfortunately, soon after going back as far as the turn of the 19th century, he seemed to come to a halt and lost all trace of his ancestors.

Hanging on the wall opposite the bookcase with, according to Robert's estimate a few thousand books – was it possible the doctor had read every single one of them? – were a number of African masks. Carved out of dark wood, decorated with various details, some of them with contorted faces, others with grotesque smiles, all of them seemed to be chosen

with great taste and displayed in a carefully thought-out scheme. Even in colour they matched the hues of the floorboards of dark, probably also African timber.

Robert too put on a mask, a mask of awe; so this is how intellectuals live. For a while he just stood there, looking. The doctor did not take his eyes off him, initially attentively, slightly nervously, but eventually the tension in face gave way to a relaxed expression, the corners of his lips turning up in a self-satisfied smile.

Robert's brow suddenly furrowed; on the floor in front of the sofa he noticed a leopard skin rug. And next to it another made from the skin of a tiger. Both were exquisitely taxidermied, paws with claws and heads still attached, grinning at the visitor with the piercing gaze of their glass eyes and a wide-open mouth into which the taxidermist had tried very carefully to include rows of neat white teeth. And a strip of red velvet taking on the role of the tongue. Robert shook his head disapprovingly and gave the doctor an astounded look.

'So what. Everyone frowns upon it now, but it used not to be an issue. People used to shoot animals, now they trim their claws and give them fancy haircuts. If I had refused to join the safari back then I could have ended up being roasted or cooked in a casserole. In any case, I would not be here today,' he snorted with contempt with the self-confidence of someone who had been through and survived a great deal.

'This is not in accordance with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. The export and import of endangered animal species like the Bengal tiger and the leopard is banned,' Robert said dryly with the air of an official who has never left their office but knows all the regulations off by heart.

'As I am telling you, this was a long time ago! No law can be applied in retrospect, even I know that and I am not a lawyer. What was, was! Now things are different. At about the same time, people would go on safari with a gun and not a camera, at the world Expo in Belgium they even displayed those,' said Baumgarten, nodding towards the wall with the masks. 'They were alive, men, women and children from various tribes in the Congo. At the time they called it a human zoo. What do you have to say about that?'

The doctor didn't wait for Robert's answer, instead he laughed loudly.

'Do you have an import licence? They seem very old and would probably be considered part of national heritage. Such objects are not allowed to leave the country of origin apart from as museum exhibits with the appropriate documentation…' Robert did not give up.

‘I was given them as a present. And, once again, I could not refuse,’ the doctor interrupted him.

‘Then you should have declared them. Especially if their value exceeds the value of gifts for public sector employees stipulated by the law, which is…’

‘Come on, what is it with you? Do you not comprehend the concept of a timeline? And how time passes? And the fact that in one period certain rules are in place, in another period others? And that rules change, just like states and regimes? Not to mention that the laws should be interpreted *cum grano salis*! And that, if I had been a stickler for the rules at the time, I would have put human lives in danger… For God’s sake, I am a doctor! I save lives, get that!’ The doctor’s voice was getting louder with every sentence, his patience waning.

‘Yes,’ Robert nodded. ‘I understand.’

Clearly the time had come for him to raise that protective screen, remove himself, at least in spirit. He thought about what it must have been like to chat to Ignacius Knoblehar. He too was someone educated, erudite, or at least a polyglot, but despite everything he never forgot his humble origins and modesty. Even when he set off for Sudan it was not for that typical white conviction of the superiority of a pale skin. Most of all, Knoblehar wanted to help down there, Robert was convinced. Truly help, save lives, without self-infatuation and without discrimination. Help people, even though – or precisely because – they were black, protect them from the shackles of slavery. For Knoblehar, eradicating the slave trade was one of the main aims of his travels. Not a desire for adventure or money but genuine human kindness drove him to Sudan, this much Robert was able to gather from his tale, even though it was written in rather antiquated Slovene.

‘Are you even listening to me?’

‘Yes,’ Robert nodded emphatically. ‘When did you notice that the ladder was gone?’ he asked bluntly, as if suddenly realising what he had come here for and did not want to lose any more time.

‘The ladder?’ the doctor asked, peering almost pitifully over his glasses. As if trying to figure out whether he is dealing with a student without a chance to pass on to the next year, and whether he should tell him straight away.

‘The ladder that disappeared, the reason I was sent here,’ Robert’s voice sounded somewhat weary.

‘Oh, that ladder!’ the doctor cried out as if happy to see a long-lost friend. ‘Of course, we need to find the ladder!’ he said, clapping with a child-like enthusiasm. ‘I noticed it was gone yesterday, when I returned from a trip to the seaside. It is possible it was taken a week ago, which was when I left. That probably means there are no traces left, does it not? But will you take a look anyway, take a few samples? If the scumbag touched those metal hooks under the ladder with his bare hands, he probably left some traces, a skin flake or even a fingerprint…?’

Robert shook his head. Unfortunately that is not how it works. Even if there were any fingerprints left, he could not call in forensics merely because of the disappearance of a ladder – however close a friend the doctor was to his boss’s father. It would not be right, it is simply not done… The doctor probably doesn’t have a clue what this kind of investigation costs. Perhaps he is aware that all such expenses are covered by tax-payers’ money, which means that all investigations need to be in the public interest. This in turn implies that at the least anything stolen must be worth something, where there is no murder involved. Not the disappearance of a plain wooden attic ladder… He frowned and stared at the floor in embarrassment, trying to figure out how to explain all this to the doctor.

‘And what do you estimate the disappeared ladder’s value might be?’

‘Excuse me…? But that is not… that is immaterial! It is not important what it was worth…’

‘So did it then have more of an emotional value? What did you use it for anyway? Why did you need access to the attic?’

‘Listen, I will explain everything to you. But first, please sit down! Perhaps I can offer you a glass of *karkadeh*? I have just made some, it has not quite cooled yet, but it is almost ready. It is a special tea made of hibiscus flowers that is drunk in Upper Egypt. And they serve it cold,’ the doctor explained with a surprisingly conciliatory tone, as if suddenly aware that in his conversation with an ignorant guest he is using unknown words and genuinely regrets doing so. ‘Upper Egypt is basically southern Egypt, the part of the country with the upper course of the Nile.’

The doctor’s voice – when he was not shouting at him – even sounded like Attenborough.

‘Could I have a glass of water with ice instead, please,’ Robert managed to utter. Only now did he realise that he was sweating, even though he had barely moved since he arrived

here. It was very hot in the apartment but what made the situation worse was the combination of heat and humidity. The doctor, it seemed, was unaffected by either. He didn't even have an air-conditioning unit but there was a large old metal fan next to the sofa, spinning its blades wildly. All this did was churn the hot air, as if whisking egg white into a thick meringue. Vladimir Baumgaretn moved around the flat lightly and effortlessly, an albatross gliding on air currents. His linen outfit showed no traces of sweat.

'Water with ice? I would advise you against that,' the doctor returned to his patronising tone. 'Anything with ice in the summer is not only pointless, since it does not quench your thirst, but can also be bad for you, causing inflammation of the upper respiratory tract. *Karkadeh* will be just right for you, believe me,' he snapped and disappeared round the corner, probably into the kitchen.

He returned moments later holding a silver tray with two glasses of a deep scarlet liquid. He put it down on the massive table with a marble top at the far end of the room. Robert sat down, reached for the glass and took a hesitant sip. The taste was a mix of sweet and sour, reminded him of long forgotten sweets from his childhood. He drank the rest down in one. A barely noticeable smirk appeared on the doctor's face.

'Next time, don't drink it in such a hurry, it will quench your thirst better if you drink slowly, sip by sip,' he said in an almost conspiratorial tone.

'Right,' Robert nodded.

'Now tell me, how is Little Tony-Pony?'

'Little Tony-Pony?'

'I mean, your boss. That was what they called him when he was still crawling around in nappies,' the doctor laughed. But only an extremely naïve person would interpret the expression on his face as kind. And Rober was too busy with the glass, fiddling with it, inspecting at it from all sides, studying the engraved pattern, so he missed the contemptuous expression on the doctor's face.

'His father and I were colleagues at the University Hospital, and we hung out outside work as well when the kids were still young, that is why I know that nickname for him. Tell me, how is he nowadays? I must admit that even then he didn't seem the brightest, so I was surprised when his father told me he was going to study law. It is such a strict profession, I feel sorry for lawyers, not an ounce of creativity in their work. I don't know why they have

not yet been replaced by artificial intelligence, I would certainly introduce AI rather than judges. Well, it is probably merely a matter of time anyway. But Little Tony-Pony fortunately caught the last train and became a lawyer. He was born for it! Ever since he was a child he parroted everything he heard or saw, without ever adding anything of his own. An ideal lawyer. Well, then he went into the police, well, criminal investigation, whatever. I must say that I was sorry when I heard about it. Despite everything, he didn't really deserve this, the poor man…'

The doctor gave Robert such a touching, genuinely warm look, that he ignored the part about how little he appreciated his profession. It was as if, with all the charisma of a doctor and a benevolent white man, he was trying in a short but passionate speech to persuade his army of black servants that all blacks were all just lazy layabouts, and in the end they would all agree with him, clapping fervently, even cheering in support.

'Little Tony-Pony… well, I need to say that he is still just as dumb. Still, and increasingly so.' Robert laughed. Quietly at first, hesitantly, then louder and more relaxed than he had done in a long time. He was beginning to like the doctor. Although the line between sociability and infinite arrogance was very thin in his case. And he kept nimbly hopping across it, without warning, often in the same sentence. If one was not attentive, you'd sooner or later end up nodding to mockery at your own expense.

'Ah, thought so. That's how it is with stupidity, it's incurable. No operation helps, no treatment.'

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and took a sip of *karkadeh*. Robert decided to take advantage of the pause.

'So, what *did* you use the ladder for?'