

The Seventh Day

Penny Jones

I estimated I had been walking for six days and my supplies were running low. Only some dried fruit and one water bottle remained. I had been keeping the last two dried apples to celebrate the moment, which I knew must come, when I reached an oasis, one of those rare pools of water that have not completely dried out.

How many people had already stopped at this place in search of water? As I approached I could see no sign of human activity but the tracks of animals were clear in the sand. Hundreds of small paw prints traced patterns on the ground in sweeping arcs. Other hooved beasts had also been there. The movement of a snake ruffled the low dunes near the waters edge.

After stooping to drink the brackish water I rose to take in my surroundings. On the horizon were three trees with angular branches and spiny leaves. The sun was so low that they were silhouetted against a yellowing sky, throwing long black shadows across the ground towards me. The stark outlines of these shadows were broken by an occasional bump or indent caused by the projection of the dark grey veil over a stone or into a hole. Not far from the trees stood a small building.

Below a gently sloping roof were two windows and a door - black holes in the orange construction material. Was it made of sun baked brick or local stone? It was impossible to tell at this distance, so I went forward to take a closer look. As I approached over the horizon came a group of seven men with a few horses, which they led on brightly coloured woven halters. One or two women or children were riding on each horse.

Blinded by the low light I was unable to work out exactly the make up of this group but I guessed it must be formed of the members of an extended family, hoping to find new pastures after leaving their drought stricken lands.

I raised my hand in greeting and called out.

The men turned and registered no surprise at seeing me. Six of them came forward. The last remained with the horses, women and children. I offered my replenished water bottle, which they accepted with small bows and words, which I did not understand.

They then led me to the small building. I slept fitfully in here and awoke with the morning sun shining in - a soft silver light. This evening I look back through that black door from the inside across the sand towards the palms. The wooden bars they have secured across it and the three trees throw their shadows across the unreachable dunes. Some of the children occasionally visit and look at me through the windows. I hear muffled conversations.

I wonder how long they will keep me here. One apple remains, the water bottle is emptying. They haven't eaten meat for many weeks.