

Scorpions

We stopped a mile from the abandoned city, which wasn't as impressive as the brochure promised. Just a smudge of sandstone wall against the desert.

'Now you get off and walk,' the guide said.

'Why have we got to walk?'

But our camels were already kneeling. It was 41 degrees and I was knackered. Judy's face, swaddled in a hijab, was grey with dust and fatigue.

The guide spat and pointed to the walls.

'Brahmin city, no camels! You walk.'

It was no big thing, but it made me cross, all the same, talking to me like that. On the way there Judy kept looking back at him.

'What if he leaves us here?'

'Why would he do that?'

'I don't know; because he hates us?'

'You think he wants to kill paying customers?'

She didn't answer.

The homes were surprisingly well kept, for a place that everyone had left a hundred years ago - walking out into the desert in the middle of the night for no known reason, never to return.

We found plates in a kitchen, and a copper bowl filled with dust.

'Don't touch that,' I said, 'there could be scorpions inside.'

But she picked it up and tipped it out as if to prove a point.

‘Why do you always do that?’

‘What?’

‘The opposite to what I say?’

She just stood there, rubbing it with her fingertips, over and over again.

Later, when we had explored on our own, I found her at a hearth, hugging her knees.

There were blown handprints on the wall; mother, father and a child... no, a baby.

She was staring at them. I thought at first that she had been crying, but when she turned the look on her face startled me.

‘Judy, what’s wrong?’

‘Scorpions,’ she said, and got up to go.

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