THE DAWNING

**By Goitom Fesshaye, music by Mira Seigel and illustration by Pickle Illustration**

I wake in the dark before sunrise. My torch tied to the front of my bicycle so I can see. I ride along the track, past potatoes and corn and tomato plants making shadows in the dark gardens. This is Kudo felasi in Eritrea. My family have a shop and it is my responsibility to get the bread in the morning.

You’ll know the baker’s house by the smell. Warm bread fresh from the oven. I pack the loaves in my basket, the hot yellow sun soaring out of the desert, warming my back. Birds waking up and chattering, telling all the lazy people it’s morning.

You see outside my shop, all those people queuing already. The women in their colourful *Zurya* dresses and soft white scarves, smiling and calling my name. The men scowling under their hats, saying I am late even though the sweat is dripping off me from riding so fast. It’s just me in the shop till my mum comes from giving my little brothers and sisters their breakfast. That’s how I like it. It means my friends can shop freely without making her suspicious. For dates, mango, coca-cola. Shoes. All the things they will need when they leave their homes.

We are always talking about it. How many days it takes to reach the border; the places people get caught. But it’s far in the future. Whispering our dreams where the elders can’t hear us. You know the ones I mean – those old men in the shop, they love their own voices. Talking politics and football, always trying to put themselves in our conversations.

I sweep with my broom, not getting too close ‘cause I’m listening out for my friends. You’ll hear them laughing and shouting before you see them whizzing round the corner on their bikes. My mum comes. They are late. I do more sweeping, into all the corners. Thinking about swimming in the lake, jumping off the rocks into the freezing water.

Then I hear their names – from the old men’s mouths. Talking about all the boys who had left in the night. My boys. My friends. Without waiting for me to be ready. They’d planned their leaving day together and I didn’t know. This day is a black luck day. This day is the end of my childhood.

And after – nothing is the same. Half of me wants my friends to get caught and come home. And half wants them to reach Ethiopia so they’ll be there to welcome me. I can’t sleep, can’t eat. All of life is still there. The birds gossiping. The wind disturbing the trees. The sun rising out of the desert. But it doesn’t touch me. I stop paying attention to the world.

Something has to change. I have to get the courage to take the biggest jump of my life. I pretend to sleep till the crickets are still and the night is heavy. I wake my little sister and tell her goodbye. I leave my bike, it will be no good in the mountain. I walk away from Kudo felasi just with myself.