

Nadifa Mohamed

The Orchard of Lost Souls

It was a hard way to earn a new pair of shoes but for Deqo it was worth it. A month of dance lessons has taught her the *Hilgo*, *Belwo*, *Dudi* and the overly complicated *Halazvalaq*. She isn't a bad dancer but is better at improvisation than following the steps, and even now she turns left instead of right or jumps forward instead of back. They still haven't seen the shoes but that's all Toothless Milgo has talked about during the lessons. They have earned those shoes with sweat and tears and Deqo intends to wear them like a soldier wears his medals.

'Think of the shoes. Don't you want the shoes? Do you want to be barefoot forever? Concentrate then!' A sharp swipe over their feet with an acacia twig.

They have learnt to dance to the beat of Milgo's rough palm against the bottom of a plastic basin, but at the parade there will be real drums, trumpets, guitars, everything. They will be dancing in front of thousands, even the governor of the whole region will be watching, so they have to *practise, practise, practise*.

Now the day of the parade has finally arrived. Before dawn the troupe of five girls and five boys, all from the orphanage, are herded into the yard behind the camp's clinic and scrubbed half to death. Deqo's eyes are tinged red from the strong-smelling soap and she keeps rubbing them to ease the itch. A truck waits by the dispensary tent and they are dressed in traditional *macawis* and *guntiino* and then loaded into the back. The truck starts up, a plume of brown smoke bursting from its exhaust and Deqo grabs hold of the side as they pick up speed. It is her first time in a vehicle and she is surprised to feel such a strong breeze on her face, the edges of her hair whipped about as if on a stormy day. When the truck slows, the breeze disappears again and Deqo squints against the rising grit and clamps her lips together.

While the other children practise the songs they will sing at the parade, Deqo's attention is drawn back towards the refugee camp, the semi-circular wooden *aqals* suddenly nothing more than speckles on the surface of the earth. The grain warehouse and various clinics constantly surrounded by milling refugees are invisible from here; the arguments, the bitterness, the sadness far away. The road snakes down towards Hargeisa, the landscape bare apart from the occasional aloe bush, animal bone and plastic shoe, the only difference from the camp being the freshness of the air. The horizon is all blue sky with just a streak of yellow leading them forward, and it is difficult to imagine anything of substance ahead. Deqo half-expects the truck to reach that yellow streak and then tumble over the edge of the earth, but instead it carries on the badly tarred road until it reaches the first military checkpoint outside the city.