



XENOPHOBIA

I used to live next door to her and her husband Siphwiwe, and often I'd look after their three children, under five all of them. Their shack was almost identical to ours, random boards hammered together like a mosaic of other people's lives, some of them still bearing advertisements for sugar and Coke and mobile phones, and the window once constituted the windshield of a Toyota. Sometimes we cooked together, and the children were underfoot, little dustmites with shiny faces and white teeth. She would make the sour pap and I'd make the sauce, tomatoes, spinach, onions. We mingled our breath, our hopes and our dreams over the three-legged potjie, and the charcoal glowing and crackling underneath smelled of our friendship, lasting, hard, and our husbands came home from the mines some weekends, tired and taciturn.

I don't know when the troubles began. The shift was so slow I didn't see it coming, or if I did, I felt it would not touch us, but one night she came to me and said, "You must go. You are Shangaan. It is not safe." Gcina herself was Zulu, legal, protected.

I could not just go. Joseph would not be back until the weekend after next, and if I left, where would he find me?

"He won't come back," Gcina said. "There are troubles on the mines too. Siphwiwe said so." And as she spoke, she did not look at me.

The burning started three days later. I smelled it and heard the screams, the anger and the fear, the township music we had tried so desperately to get used to and never did. I hid in my shack and drew the rags across the fly-stained window, and breathed, and breathed, and breathed.

"Go, Masia," Gcina said. "You cannot stay."

"Please, Gcina. Help me. I cannot leave without Joseph. Where will I go?"

"I cannot help you," she said. "You must go. If you stay, we will be in danger too." This time, she met my eyes, and in them there was a hardness I had never seen before.

That was the last time I saw Gcina. I packed a plastic Checkers bag with what I could carry, and it was not much. Some teenage boys set upon me as I left, but the police intervened and took pity on me in my state. And I was lucky: I saw a picture in *The Star*, a man crawling after a beating, set on fire. I thought I recognised the shirt as belonging to one of our neighbours, a tall, unassuming man from Moçambique. And later, another photograph: the same man, dead, a mere shape wrapped in a blanket, with the white socks of school children walking by in an uncaring direction.



The papers have a sanitised word for us: displaced. Like a lost handbag, but with fewer possessions. I will be deported, very soon. I do not know where Joseph is.

My daughter was born in a Police Station. She is three days old. I have called her Xena. Not a princess, not a warrior, but I hope her name will always remind her of these strange and abject days when the full Blood Moon hung low over Africa.

I wonder if Gcina will allow herself to think of me sometimes.