

ONCE FOUND, NOW LOST

BY CHRIS SMITH

Late one afternoon, Soul turned up drunk at my place. I was pulling the razor-wired gates shut when he appeared beyond the wall, listing a little. Gray-green clouds massed above our heads; the Highveld rains were coming on. He wanted to know if I'd drive him to Soweto.

Soul was more than an employee, but we weren't quite friends. This was 2002 and I was living in Johannesburg, working as a freelance journalist and shooting for a photo agency. For the past month, Soul had worked as a "fixer"—my guide, translator, and bodyguard. As a white American working in the townships and the inner city, I needed a guy like Soul.

Professional fixers cost too much. Soul, who was a distant relation of a friend, worked for cheap. He was more or less unemployed, occasionally picking up a shift at a hardware store in the city's northern suburbs. He had spent fifteen years as a truck driver in Jo'burg and, although he was vague about the details of his past, his knowledge of the city was encyclopedic.

Soul was around 40 and cadaverously thin, a chain smoker who enjoyed his beer. We worked on weekdays and sometimes drank on the weekends. Once, he invited me to a barbecue at his sister's home in Soweto. Big beers arrived by the crateful from a shop at the end of the street and Soul soon got drunk. He did a shuffling half-step around the tiny yard to the music and picked a fight with one of his cousins, a guy who could be counted on to talk him down.

On the clock, Soul was as reliable as they came. On days when I was shooting, we'd meet at a coffee shop and venture out into the city. At one bar, young, bored drunks talked loudly in township Zulu and glowered at my camera. The manager watched TV behind the bar's bulletproof glass, his shotgun resting on the counter. After a few minutes, Soul urged me to hurry up.

Back out on the sidewalk, he explained. "Those men kept asking me what you were to me," he said. "They said, 'He's just some white man, why I should protect you?' I had to tell them I was also a journalist, and we were working together. Otherwise they would have pushed me away and robbed you."

We had a few encounters like that. Out of necessity, I trusted Soul.

But his request for a ride to Soweto was perplexing. He told a complicated story about going to see his daughter, Gugu, who was living in a neighborhood on the edges of Soweto, and taking her to some relative's house. Soul adored Gugu. He was estranged from his wife, though, and didn't get to see her much.

It was difficult to grasp Soul's full story in any situation because he offered only the bare minimum of details. That was one of the ways in which he held power over me. I paid his salary, so I was the boss. But he was my protector and my line to life in Johannesburg. He possessed knowledge I didn't have, and he was aware of this leverage.

I offered to drive him to the downtown taxi ranks instead, where he could catch a minibus back to his sister's in Soweto. He started to protest, "Mr. Chris—" but the energy seemed to leak out of him. He just nodded his assent. The sky opened up as we drove. Rain beat down on the roof of the car, drowning out the radio. Soul slumped into his seat, silent.

We drove down the hill, past the radio tower and into the ghostlands. We passed the hulks of old red-brick manufacturing buildings and the train station. When we hit the taxi ranks, I slipped Soul a small wad of bills—his wages, plus taxi fare, plus a bit more for beer. We said goodbye, but I couldn't read his expression.

After I left Johannesburg I sent him a letter with a stack of photos once but I didn't hear anything. He didn't have email or a cell phone, and I had lost his sister's number. Years later, when I returned to South Africa, I asked about Soul at the hardware store where he had worked. No one had seen him for years.

I still think about that night. Not so much about refusing to drive him to Soweto, but about something less quantifiable. Soul and I never figured out what we were to each other. I do know that I got more from him than I gave. [LNG.SH/2-41](#)