PUSHY

P. VAN ROOYEN

I LIVED in Doornkloof for twenty years. It all seems pretty remote and improbable now, but at the time it was just what I needed to take my mind off things after my first wife died.

The people were a friendly lot—though there was a bit of a feeling even then, you know. It was a typical Highveld town with the usual gaggle of civil servants and shop-keepers, and a huge sheep-farming district to keep them in business. The black population far outnumbered the white and consisted mainly of Africans who lived outside the town in what was called a 'location'; but there was also a small community of Indians, some of the few who had been allowed to cross the Natal border to seek work. They made splendid waiters.

The hotel I bought occupied a strategic position in the middle of the shopping centre. There were two others, but neither was good enough to compete with the Protea. They existed largely on our overflow. "Hot and cold running water in every room" was one of our boasts, and it certainly helped to pull in commercial travellers from all over the country. During the summer months the place would be full of Portuguese women and children, refugees from the heat of Lourenço Marques. Goodness knows what they found to do all day. The lounge was large and comfortable; anyone in search of a sundowner and gossip was sure to find someone he knew there. The service was good, there was plenty of iced lager, and there was Pushy, of course.

Pushy ran the public bar and was an integral part of it all. If you'd ever run a pub, you'd know what a godsend it is to have someone you can trust in a job like that. He had complete charge of the bar: he did the stock-taking, kept the keys, and his books were always in perfect order. He was hardly an imposing figure—I had the floor raised six inches on his side of the counter to bring him up to a comfortable working height—but there indeed was a man of substance. His control of the rowdier elements was complete. He always reminded me of a little time bomb, ticking irascibly away, and every bit as liable to go off. Everyone, from the Mayor of Doornkloof down to the boy who washed the glasses, caught the rough edge of his tongue sooner or later. Now and again he'd get a newcomer on the raw; but mostly, people enjoyed his sarcasm and even took a special

pride in provoking it. However stinging and deadly his wit, it was generally agreed that he was only living up to his reputation and didn't mean a word of it. I wasn't nearly so sure myself, but I didn't say so, of course.

I saw a lot of him, but somehow there was no real contact between us. At night, after closing time, he would subside with a grunt at his usual table in the main lounge and drink two slow whiskies—he would never touch a drop while on duty. I would be at my desk, clearing up for the night—perhaps typing out the next day's menus with two fingers—and now and again, in his thick Polish accent, he would make some slow comment on the day's events.

"Bit off a trouble with Max again tonight. That man—he stay all night if I let him. 'Here, man', I say, "aven't you got a home to go to?' 'Ag, Pushy, old boy', he say. 'I'll Pushy-old-boy you', I tell him. 'Vat Mrs. Bothma say to you when you come home so late?' I tell him to go and drink somevere else; I von't give him any more."

Cadgers didn't stand a chance in Pushy's bar. It was a brave man who'd try shirking his responsibilities more than once with exposure certain and imminent. "Come awn, come awn," Pushy would say, grey moustache bristling, "you don't get avay vith it. Ve all play fair here." If you didn't like it, there was always the Grand, as Pushy was quick to point out. And if you took his advice in a fit of pique, somehow, sooner or later, you would be back again. He seldom lost a customer.

Looking back on it now, I often wish I had made an effort to find out more about Pushy. My own time was fully occupied and I suppose that must be my excuse. He seemed to be quite alone in the world; he had no close friends—apparently didn't feel the lack of any. Perhaps he was shy and needed a little encouragement to become more communicative. In all my dealings with him I could sense a barrier. It was like the counter which he kept between himself and the rest of humanity and without which he seemed lost and ill at ease.

Off duty, he was a different person. He would go for walks and window-shop in a desultory way, never straying very far because his feet worried him. I can see him still, plodding painfully from one dusty window to the other, examining its contents with a heavy frown on his face, the inevitable cigarette hanging from the side of his mouth and the ash from it dropping unheeded onto his taut waistcoat. He read nothing beside the

daily papers; he had no interest other than his job.

Sometimes I suspected him of helping out the waiters when they got into debt. This happened often enough, as they were born gamblers and frittered away their wages on all sorts of useless luxury. Mind you, there wasn't much in the way of excitement around there for them, because entertainment in Doornkloof is strictly for whites. Danka, the porter, was always borrowing money and forever in debt. It was his one failing. Of course, one knew that somewhere in the slums outside the town he kept a wife and a steadily-growing family. Every year, according to Pushy, who seemed to know, there would be another mouth to feed, and the house was cramped and squalid. Depressing, if one thought about it; but, living in Doornkloof, one probably didn't.

The hotel was always deserted on Saturday afternoons, and sometimes I took advantage of the peace and quiet to do a little overtime. On the afternoon I remember, only Danka was on duty; and as I went into my office, I noticed him leaning against one of the pillars, quite wrapped up in himself and looking miserable, I thought. Apparently Pushy, who came in soon afterwards, thought so too. I heard the slow step and the heavy smoker's cough as the old man lowered himself into his usual chair.

"Danka? And vot is the matter with you?"

"Notting, Sir."

"You look like your grandmother died or something?"

"No, Sir." Danka's voice sounded flat.

"You been gambling, I suppose."

"No, Sir. It's not that, Sir," came the injured reply. "I got trouble, Sir. Mr. Fisher, Sir, he say he going to take back my wardrobe I bought from him if I don't pay him straightaway, Sir, and he say I could starting pay him, Sir, after six months, he say, Sir. Now he want half straightaway, Sir, and it's fifteen pound, Sir. . . ."

Pushy promised to talk to Mr. Fisher about it. Danka thanked him profusely and that ended their conversation. I didn't let on that I had heard. But when I found out quite accidentally a little while afterwards that, old Fisher being his usual uncompromising self, Pushy had paid the bill and would recover the money from Danka "when he can afford to pay me", I taxed Pushy with it. It didn't do to encourage Danka to buy more than he could afford. I warned him that sooner or later,

Danka would let him down; but Pushy wouldn't even admit that he was helping him, let alone thank me for showing an interest. How can you hope to get anywhere with a man like that?

After almost twenty years of the Protea and its problems, I began to feel a hankering for home, so I sold out to a well-known syndicate in Johannesburg. It was rather a brusque young fellow—Johnson, his name was—whom they sent down to run the place. He obviously knew all the answers. The changeover went smoothly, for everything was well organised—if I say so myself—and Pushy's side of it was, as ever, in apple-pie order. So it was with some relief that I took myself off to the Bushveld, away from civilization, to take advantage of a long-standing invitation to relax on a farm bordering the Game Reserve. There, with no newspapers or post within twenty arduous miles, I just forgot about things for a while.

About a week before my plane to England was due in Johannesburg, I left the farm to spend a few days in Doornkloof. I wanted a last look at the Protea and the many good friends I was leaving behind. As I pushed open the familiar swing doors, I felt as though I'd never been away. A competent-looking young receptionist signed me in and directed a porter to take my bags. It wasn't Danka. He'd left, I was told. Yes—for good.

The public bar was rather quiet. Jurie van Rensburg was the only one I recognised, and he was sitting at a table having a drink by himself and looking rather glum, I thought. He wasn't a particular friend of mine, but I was thirsty. He brightened up considerably when he saw me.

"Ag, man, it's nice to see you again. Are you staying long? What will you drink?" I told him and he summoned a steward.

"Things isn't the same since you left," he went on. "It's that new broom we got here—you know, Johnson. He's busy sweeping all the customers away as well as the cobwebs, man." Jurie struck me heartily on the shoulder. "Everybody goes to the Grand now, but I still drop in sometimes for old times' sake."

"Bad as that, eh?" I said, flattered. "But surely Pushy hasn't left. Where is he, the old devil? Howcome he isn't serving? Is he ill?"

Jurie looked at me in some surprise.

"Ag—didn't you know, man? Old Pushy died three weeks ago—yes," he consulted his massive gold watch which showed the days of the week. "Three weeks ago yesterday. He had a stroke."

That shook me; I could hardly believe it. I don't think Pushy had had a day's illness in all the twenty years I had known him.

Jurie gave a short laugh.

"Heart failure, they *said*," he went on. "More like his blood pressure what finished him off. Man," he bent forward confidentially, "they say he and Johnson had a flaming row and I 'ear that he took Pushy's keys away and the old geezer nearly blew up, he was so cross."

I felt quite stunned. Pushy—dead!

"The stupid oaf," I said. "What did he want to do that for? I *told* him. . . ."

"Ag, you can unnerstand it, man. These *slim kêrels* come from Jo'burg and they don't trus' anyone and they think that everyone is going to do them down. He told old Pushy that he was going to run the hotel *his* way and that old Pushy was too big for his boots. . . ." Jurie chuckled and looked smug, drained his beer and ordered two more.

When I could speak again, I said, "You apparently thought so too."

"Ag, well, man, you know what it is. These Jews come here from Russia or somewhere and all they are after is money, and they hobnob with the kaffers . . . *sies*! You can't *like* people like that!"

A slow fury began to rise in my throat, but there was something behind this and I intended to find out what it was. Jurie had been one of Pushy's most fervent admirers. I swallowed hard.

"What do you mean?"

"They should be thrown out of the country—that's what I mean." His voice rose. "They're all the same, man, all Communists. There you got that Indian building his house next to the Bothmas up on the hill. He thinks he can do what he likes now, with all that money—building next to white people. We'll show him where he gets off. . . ." His words tumbled over each other and he shook with rage.

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

"Danka, of course, Danka!" He looked at me as though I were mad. "Hell, man—you don't know nothing! Old Pushy left him all his money! What sort of a white man would do a thing like that? Damn traitor!" He spat. "Fancy leaving all your money to a *verdomde* Indian!"