

AN HOUR BEFORE DAYBREAK, JOHN JOSEPH Kitching closes his eyes on the memory elephants, and whimpers for the last time with only the hospice sister standing guard. His exhausted wife Shirley has just left the bedside to get some sleep.

The sister clucks and shakes her head. All those hours of sitting through his coma, and she misses the final whistle. Match over. Finish and klaar. Death sneaks in a dropkick when the ref isn't looking.

Having checked for vital signs, she completes his patient chart before glancing at the upside-down diamanté watch pinned to her lapel. Almost four-thirty.

Using two fingers, she holds his eyelids shut for several minutes before stretching to ease her backache. Night vigils are stressful. Curtains stir when there isn't a breeze; dying eyes open and stare; breathing fluctuates; flitting moths make weird shadows. She's not one to watch muted TV or fiddle with knitting.

She reaches for her cigarettes and lighter, then leans out the window overlooking the sea for a smoke, needing a transition before she breaks the news. Her patients always die. She's getting on too. It's a lose-lose situation. The breeze pongs of abandoned sardine bait and fish guts that carry a warning: one of these days it'll be her lying there gaping like a dead shad.

She veils the image in a smokescreen of more cigarettes before going through to wake Shirley, who needs the sleep. All the fuss and pain of one more death can bloody well wait.

KITCHEN BOY SCORES HIS LAST TRY is the main headline in the *Daily*

*News* that afternoon. A young sports writer who tries to emulate the early *Drum* journalists has written:

JJ Kitching, World War II hero and Springbokwing renowned for his speedy footwork on the field, has died at his home near Durban. None of the rugby fans I spoke to could explain where the Kitchen Boy monicker came from

He should have asked the old boys rehashing past glories over their cravats and gins in the clubs where they go to escape the busyness of wives. In 1949 at Kingsmead, during the third Test against the All Blacks, there was a bellow from the main stand as JJ accelerated towards the posts: 'Go, Kitching boy!' The try was disallowed because his boot heel had gone over the sideline. But still the crowd cheered and chanted, 'Kitchen Boy! Kitch-Kitch-Kitchen Boy!' as he walked back to the lineout, inkblots of sweat spreading on the green jersey with its orange-gold collar, his baggy white shorts streaked with grass stains, and teammates thumping his back. Looking up at his father proud and sober in the VIP seats, and his mother laughing with rare delight under her straw hat with the bunch of artificial cherries as she waved at him.

Dot Kitching hated the nickname, which the papers picked up and crowds yelled from Loftus to Newlands and later in Britain and France and Australia. 'Kitchen Boy' was unfitting for a hero. 'My Persian lamb,' she had called him when his dark baby curls were sheared to boy's comas sleeked against his head. 'My Johnny. My champion.'

She drummed in her expectations long before he was old enough to catch and throw a ball. I'm counting on you. Don't disappoint me too.

Like his father, JJ was schooled in the old Natal farming tradition: good shot, fine rugby player, steady on his pins after far too many beers, bluff with women. He had his grandfather's unruly black hair and also his glass-blue Irish eyes that, to his bitter regret, were colour blind. JJ was

barred from being a pilot when he joined up and had to train as a navigator instead.

Being a hero twice over has made him famous. Even though he is eighty-one and long retired when he dies, JJ Kitching is eulogised in the papers and news bulletins as an icon of a time when war meant self-sacrifice and players were good sports; when first teams were amateurs playing for the love of the game, and the cash they received in small brown envelopes covered only bus fares, liniment for sore muscles, a mixed grill with a line-up of cold Castles after the Saturday afternoon match, and a box of Black Magic for the girlfriend.

The current Springbok captain says, 'JJ was one of the very best.'

'The grand old man of KZN rugby,' is the Sharks captain's tribute.

'They were an unforgettable team and damn nearly unconquered. Won thirty out of their thirty-one games against Britain and France.' The curator of the Rugby Museum at the Sports Science Institute in Newlands leads reporters to a photo of the 1951/52 Springboks and points out JJ. 'That's him. Kitchen Boy. One of the all-time greats.'

The few remaining Moth comrades in his Shellhole sing 'Old soldiers never die' with eyes like sad old bulldogs, then raise the beer glasses in their freckled paws to recite the mantra of their dwindling band: 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.'

'Him especially,' the new Old Bill adds.

John Joseph Kitching has fought to the end against the prostate cancer invading his spine and brain, refusing morphine on the grounds that men need clear minds going into battle, though Shirley adds drops of it to the water he sucks feebly from a sponge. As he drifts in and out of consciousness, nightmares swoop like returning bats through his last waking thoughts. Shell-shock, they'd called it in 1945 after the prisoner-of-war camps were liberated and their gaunt inmates flown to convalescent hospitals in England.

He dies remembering war, with his mouth open in a soundless scream.

The hospice sister eases his jaw, gentling his expression before she leaves the room.

The house of death is buzzing. For the past week, Hugh and his sister Lin have been sleeping there so they could be with their mother when it happened. Hugh comforts her while Lin calls and deals with the doctor, relatives, friends and neighbours, but it's late morning before the undertaker's black van whispers up the drive. Hugh sees it from the side window of the bedroom where Shirley still numbly sits – JJ is cool now, his face and fingertips turning a purplish blue – and he goes down to meet it.

Two men in khaki lab coats are at the back doors of the van pulling out a folded stretcher. As they come towards him Hugh wonders if they've escaped from a comic strip. The short fat one with the clipboard has a cascade of chins and thinning hair plastered flat with Brylcreem. Shambling next to him, carrying the stretcher, is a gawky assistant with a ginger brush cut. Arcs of miniature unicorn horns in polished copper radiate from the tops of his ears.

The short one holds out a row of fingers like raw pork sausages. 'Pleased to meet you, sir. We're from Digby & Smith, your superior interment service. Sorry for your loss.'

The fingers are cold, as though just taken out of a fridge, but Hugh manages not to flinch. 'Thanks. At last. This way.'

'I'm Purkey. Always a shock, eh? Life's but a walking shadow. Macbeth.' He wheezes up the stairs. 'Nice house, sir. Elevated beachfront with full sea view. Very nice.'

Perky? Somewhat puzzled, Hugh gestures at the main bedroom with its now-redundant medical equipment. 'My father's in there.'

Shirley struggles up from her chair by the bed. Purkey bustles forward and pumps her hand. 'Good morning, madam. I'm Purkey from Digby & Smith, your superior interment service. My sincere condolences. He was a great man, your hubby. It's an honour to attend a Springbok.'

She manages a quavery 'Thank you.'

'But alas, the Lord giveth and taketh away.' Purkey lets go, his chins trembling with emotion. 'O death, where is thy sting? First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians.'

Shirley starts weeping again and Hugh puts an arm round her shoulders. ‘Stop that. You’re upsetting her.’

‘Excuse *me*. It’s part and parcel of the procedure for the newly bereaved as laid down by Mr Digby Senior. We try to ease the way. Don’t we, Clyde?’

‘Ja. Sure.’ Like marbles, the assistant’s eyes roll around the room’s medical clutter. He sometimes scores morphine and sealed needles at deathbeds if the family are too upset to notice. They’re perks of the trade.

Purkey forges on. ‘The Digby & Smith team undertakes to handle all the finer details right through to your memorial service. We could do Springbok emblems on the casket, for e.g.’

‘Please, not now.’ Hugh tries to shield his weeping mother. ‘We want a simple burial at Stellawood, okay? No frills.’

‘Righty-oh.’ With a jovial nod to indicate that he understands, no problem, Purkey says, ‘What would the lady like him to wear?’

‘Best suit, is the usual.’ A stud piercing Clyde’s tongue creates spit, so he struggles with the sibilants.

‘That’s a fact. We need to take it with, so if you’ll just fetch it so long? Also a shirt, favourite tie, ornamental hanky, shoes and socks, the works. They want to look good on their last journey. Shame.’ Purkey’s smile is as reassuring as a life-policy salesman’s.

‘I can’t do this.’ Hugh calls out, ‘Lin! We need you.’

His sister has been listening from the passage in the hope that Hugh will handle things, but of course he never does. She comes in and confronts Purkey. ‘What do you mean, they want to look good? Dad’s gone.’

‘Last impressions, madam. We make sure that the hair and face are shipshape. That’s why we need a recent photo. Colour, if you’ve got.’

‘You’re not going to do anything gross like touch him up?’

‘Tidy, rather. If there’s a final viewing, foundation and blusher do wonders for the morbidity. We normally suggest –’

‘No viewing.’ Hugh urges his mother out of the room saying, ‘Come and lie down, Mum. Lin will handle the rest.’

‘Moving on.’ Purkey’s expression does not hide what he thinks of

family members who shirk a final viewing. He darts a glance at Lin's left hand. 'Miz Kitching, is it?'

'Yes.'

'Someone will have to visit our showroom to choose the casket. We use only prime forest hardwoods: sapele mahogany is popular, or there's wenge for a more modern styling. Both come with imported brushed aluminium fittings and padded oyster satin lining. Outstanding quality.'

'I'll go tomorrow. Just do what needs to be done now.'

But there's no stopping the laid-down procedure. Purkey selects a pencil from his top pocket and holds it over the form on the clipboard, ready to tick off boxes. 'Then there's the extras. A flight of doves released at the grave is a nice touch. Plus we offer a full range of memorial gravestones, from marble to granite, crafted by Durban's top stonemasons.'

'No doves. And we won't need a gravestone.'

'You're talking a really simple burial, then. For a famous man like this?'

'There's a family gravestone.'

'Oh.' He plods on, 'We do eco-friendly cremations too. With our Eternal Reef option, the remains are mixed with environmentally safe porous cement to make an artificial reef. This gets transported out to sea from Sodwana and lowered to the ocean floor to encourage new coral formations in the Mozambique Current. Makes a fantastic memorial.'

'No!' Lin needs to get rid of him before she smacks his face. 'He's to be buried. I'll come and make the arrangements tomorrow, okay? Please take him away now. He's been lying there for hours. It's not right.'

'Pressure of work, madam. There were two cadavers before your dad. People mostly die in the night, you know? There must be a medical reason. Maybe if we kept statistics we could –'

Cadavers. She snaps, 'Just do your job and go.'

The flow stops, his chins quivering with affront. 'I am doing it. Giving you the options before we take him away.'

'We don't want any of them. So get on with it.' She heads for the door.

‘And his clothes, madam?’ he calls after her.

‘I’ll fetch his Moth blazer and flannels.’

‘Don’t forget the photo and the documentation: ID book and death certificate. Meantime, we’ll do the honours. Nice and easy there, Clyde.’

She doesn’t look back as she leaves, trying to ignore the metal stretcher being snapped open. She is afraid to think about what will happen to the frail body: whether her father will be washed and laid out and dressed with due reverence, or whether a mortuary worker will bundle him into the shirt and blazer and then decide to rescue his good pants and shoes from rotting or burning.

But she doesn’t tussle with this issue now. She wants to mourn her father before the news gets out and strangers start chipping away at her memory of her dad: not the war hero or the Springbok or the Durban Sales Manager for SA Breweries who’d been a rugby selector for thirty years. She wants to remember him way back, leaving home for work on his metallic blue Triumph, standing astride and stamping all his weight down on his right foot to kick-start it. He’d loved that oily farting beast and kept it for years in the garage, taking it out once a week and tooling along streets where there was little traffic, wearing an old man’s helmet and goggles, with boys pedalling after him on bicycles, mocking his pleased old man’s smile.

All gone now. All gone.