

The killer

In his travels around the world auctioneer Nick Holt uncovers some remarkable stories, as Elizabeth Walton discovers.

Nick Holt telephones from Lisbon to say that Joao Fernandez, Holt's representative in Portugal, has "one hell of a hunting story." Raw emotion, plus fractured English, compel Joao to speak frankly and without artifice.

"It was in 1995. My first time in Tanzania. It was my first day's hunting - and I almost died."

He was hunting below Mount Meru in northern Tanzania with Manuel Silva his professional hunter. Highly experienced, Silva was a family friend and a fellow countryman. The action begins mid-afternoon.

"We see this big buffalo standing alone," says Joao. "We leave the truck and walk within perhaps 30 metres

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of him. If I could shoot him it would be a very good buffalo shot. And I shoot him in the right place, just behind the shoulder. But he doesn't drop, he runs into the tall grass.

"I shout to Silva 'Why don't you shoot? I don't have time to reload, shoot!' But he says, 'No, no, Joao I am the professional. I only shoot if the buffalo charges.'

"We carry on tracking him: we see lots of blood. He is running hard and when I shoot him again he still does not fall. My shot is too far back on the belly. I say to Silva, 'You must shoot - maybe we are taking chances here.' He says, 'No, don't worry, I have been in this situation many times before today.'

"The buffalo runs away and waits for us to catch up. We have changed places. Now he is hunting us. He waits and waits in the tall grass while we are looking for blood and he charges - from seven metres. I take another shot, and then Silva shoots."

Silva's shot merely penetrates the hide, no more.

"The bullet is very old. A professional hunter keeps his bullets forever because he takes so few shots. I step back, and the buffalo sweeps past.

"He wants Silva, he does not want me. I don't know why. I want to shoot again but he is on top of Silva and I risk shooting the man, not the buffalo. Dust and rocks fly everywhere because that animal is very angry."

Horns and tusks are tearing into Silva, he screams at Joao to shoot.

"I could do nothing," he says, his despair chilling. "When Silva stops moving, the buffalo turns on me. And I have one bullet left - in the gun. And I am so near that when I put the scope up I see all buffalo. I am two metres from him. I put the bullet between his eyes and he drops down. Finish."

Miraculously, Silva gets to his feet.

"His clothes are gone he wears two strips of cloth and one boot. He says, 'I am okay. But I don't know if it is possible to have lunch again with you in Portugal. Because I think I am going to die today. As he turns his back, I see two big holes like this.'" Joao holds up a fist. "And the blood is..." he mimes life-blood pumping away. His voice drops.

"I can see the inside of the man. Artery cut, you know?"



Joao Fernandez with the intimidating auction lot.

Silva collapses. He is stretched out on the back of the truck to head back to camp. Two hours later Joao made radio contact and pleaded for airborne assistance.

"They say we don't fly at night. Take Silva to Nyonga, which is a small village. I make the guy as comfortable as possible." Is he conscious? "Always. But time is running out."

For three hours they drive along a road surface wrecked by the elephants' seasonal migration. "The

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truck bounces and Silva is screaming in the back. I stop, talk to him a little bit, and travel a little bit more. And then he stopped screaming. And this is midnight. He dies exactly at midnight under that incredible African sky.

"When I arrive at Nyonga, I am so angry. With Africa. With buffaloes.

With everything." Worse was to come.

"A fax is sent to my family saying that it is me who is dead - killed by a buffalo. My wife is pregnant; she almost loses the child and my father almost dies from shock."

Three long days later, knowing nothing of the fax, Joao reaches Arusha and a telephone and calls his family to convey the news of Silva's death. For them, Joao's voice came from beyond the grave. "I said, 'Hello,' and they cannot believe it."

Returning home with the horns detached from the buffalo, Joao created the magnificent head, which will feature in Holt's March sale. Joao did not pick up a gun for two years until a professional hunter friend persuaded him to take a therapeutic trip to Africa.

"As soon as I arrived, after a trauma like that, everything came back. It's good that I am alive, but every time I go to Africa now, the buffaloes mess with my head." ■

● Holt's next sale is on March 25 in London. www.holtsauctioneers.com