

# HOLT'S

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## IN THE GUNROOM

Nick telephones from Lisbon to say that Joao Fernandez, *Holt's* representative in Portugal, has "one hell of a hunting story." When it's my turn to hear the story, raw emotion plus fractured English compel Joao to tell it like it is; there is no 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 Manual Silva acting as his PH. Highly experienced, Silva was also 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 30metres 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 the PH, 'Why don't you shoot? I don't have time to load another bullet... 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." Each time they glimpse their prey, he is gone. "He is running hard, and when I shoot him again, still he does not fall - I'm exhausted; I can't aim properly. My shot is too far back; on the belly. I say to the PH, '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'. He is very confident, very much the experienced professional. And that is his downfall."

Were you scared? "No," says Joao with an empty laugh. "Not yet. 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 like 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 PH keeps his bullets for ever 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, 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,” Joao reports, “he wears two strips of cloth and one boot. He says, ‘I am OK. 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’.” Even so, facing Joao, Silva appears relatively unharmed. “But 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?” Silva collapses. Tourniquets out of the question, Joao is left “to see my friend live to his death.” With the two Swahili-speaking trackers emerging from hiding, Silva is stretched out on the back of the truck to head back to camp.

Images of the day are burned into Joao’s memory. “I remember the tsetse flies: there were thousands, trying to suck all that blood. And bite him and bite him. With the pain and all those flies on him, it’s terrible, you know?” Two hours later, he makes radio contact and pleads for airborne assistance. “They say, ‘We don’t fly at night. You are on your own. 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 truck bounces and the guy 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. He is looking at me, but I know he is dead now and I close his eyes.

“When I arrive at Nyonga, I am so angry. With Africa. With buffaloes. With everything.” While the women, who knew Silva well, prepare his body for transportation, the Police turn up to compound Joao’s misery. “The Police came to ask me, ‘Did you shoot Mr Silva, because the wounds are so round? And where is the buffalo?’ So stupid.” 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 six months 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, his voice comes from beyond the grave. “I said, ‘Hello...’ and they cannot believe it.” Soon they assemble at Lisbon airport to double-check - “they think maybe I will return in a box.”

In Portugal, Joao is both a gunsmith and a world-renowned taxidermist. “The Portuguese love English guns, and go crazy for Purdeys,” he tells me. Aficionados also prize the brilliant artistry displayed in his taxidermy, which sells like hot cakes. His latest work began as mere road kill - a jay - his imagination breathing life into the bird. “No one cared about this thing in the road, and I made a piece of art out of it. He is losing his balance on the branch of a fig tree with the wings a little bit open, a piece of fig in his beak. The first guy who sees it on my work-bench says, ‘How much?’ Startled, I say, ‘1,000euros.’ ‘It’s mine,’ he says.” Back in 1995, returning home with the horns finally detached from the killer buffalo’s rotting carcass, our virtuoso created the magnificent head in *Holt’s March* sale. The stare is imperious. “Buffaloes look at you like you owe them money,” he says, and points out that the

spells cast by the villagers to cast out the killer's evil have marked one horn. Leading taxidermists are all naturalists. "You need at least once to have looked into the eyes of the animal," says Joao. With the killer buffalo, he looked too closely.

The sale of the head may draw a line under the nightmare. Joao did not pick up a gun for two years until a PH friend he had shared with Silva persuaded him to take a therapeutic trip to Africa. "As soon as I arrived, after a trauma like that, everything came back. On a hunt, the trackers will often smell the game before the hunters see it. So when I said: 'There is a herd of buffaloes over that way...' they looked at me and laughed." But Joao was right and this time he got his kill in one. "It's good that I am alive, but every time I go to Africa, the buffaloes... they mess with my head."