

SAVING JOHANNES

by Eddie Woods

Johannes van Dam (1946-2013). Journalist, walking encyclopedia, and culinary writer extraordinaire. And one of my dearest Amsterdam friends since we first met in 1980, which was still early Ins & Outs Press days. Johannes, whom I often called Joe. A name that he liked, providing it came from me!

"Joe? His name isn't Joe, it's Johannes!"

That was the English bookseller Bernard Stone speaking. We had an appointment, and en route to the Ins & Outs building at Oudezijds Achterburgwal 169 he bumped into Johannes.

"Ah, Bernard," Johannes said. "I heard you were in town. Where are you headed?"

"I'm going to see Eddie," Bernard replied.

Johannes asked if he could tag along, Bernard said sure, thus when I answered the doorbell there stood the two of them.

"Hey, Joe, so nice to see you!" I exclaimed while throwing my arms around Johannes. Followed by Bernard's shocked response.

Johannes smiled, pointed to the floor, and said calmly: "Here it's Joe."

That was probably around 1985. But now we'll flash back to 1982, shortly before Johannes began working in the original Kookboekhandel, let alone buying out its lady owner, moving the entire stock to the Runstraat and transforming the shop into what was arguably the best cookbook store in Holland or even Benelux. And hence also prior to embarking on a career of writing (his now legendary) restaurant reviews, initially for *Elsevier* magazine and thereafter for the Amsterdam daily newspaper *Het Parool*.

Among the activities Johannes busied himself with till then was attempting to translate the stories of one of his favorite American authors, Paul Bowles. There was something about the undercurrent of darkness in Bowles' writing that particularly attracted Johannes. At a certain point, however, Johannes realized that his efforts were not bearing fruit. Despite his talent and considerable literary ability, he simply wasn't up to the task of rendering Bowles into Dutch. This was more than disconcerting. It dumped Johannes, already no stranger to depressive mood swings, into the deep well of a truly acute depression. A despair that I wasn't aware of (nor do I know for sure if anyone was) until...

I'd just left Ins & Outs and was on my way for another spaghetti supper at Café Bern on the Nieuwmarkt (they didn't call me 'Spaghetti Eddie' there for nothing!), when turning the corner onto the Oude Hoogstraat I ran into Joe on his bike.

"Let me guess," I said. "You're coming from the Bern."

"Yup," Johannes replied.

We started chatting, I inquired what he was up to, whereupon he said: "Oh, I'm planning my departure."

"Sounds like a big trip. Somewhere interesting, I trust."

"Yes, no. I'm leaving. Departing. Period."

That and his more than merely melancholy eyes said it all. 'Fucking hell,' I thought. 'He's serious. He's really leaving us!'

I took a deep mental breath and replied, "Anytime soon?"

What else can you say when a close friend coolly informs you that he's about to do himself in?

"No, I've some arrangements to make first. It'll be a little while yet. Not too long, though."

He briefly alluded to his difficulties in translating Bowles, said he had to be going, wished me a pleasant meal, and cycled off.

'Bye, Joe,' I said to myself. And in a dazed state of mind tinged with impending grief, continued my walk to the Nieuwmarkt. And whilst walking understood that I couldn't tell anyone what had just been imparted to me. Johannes didn't have to say, 'Keep this to yourself.' Since it was a given that I would. That's how close we were. 'Like brothers,' he'd frequently let it be known. I arrived at the Bern a few minutes later, and promptly seated myself for a spaghetti dinner I couldn't quite finish and that I'll never forget. Right down to the table I was sitting at, up the short steps at the back, turn left, and against the low railing.

I made a brave stab at eating (I adored Bern founder Helmut Winzeler's spicy pasta sauce, which more than 30 years on hasn't changed a bit), slowly twirling minute portions of spaghetti on my fork, and once that was in my mouth chewing without really tasting. So troubled was I by a succession of discomfiting thoughts.

'Gee, no more Joe. How sad. Everyone's gonna miss him.' And then, suddenly growing angry, 'How can he do this to us?' Now I was fuming. 'Selfish bastard!' Yeah, I felt like, er, strangling him. Finally I managed to calm down by telling myself to let it go. 'It's Johannes' life, he can do with it what he wants.'

I let go fairly thoroughly, too. I had my own life to get on with. I didn't phone (to ask what, if he was still there?), I didn't inquire of others about him. Whenever an image of Joe did arise in my mind's eye, I might mention it to my dog Snuffie or say something to my ex-wife (and still closest friend) Jane. I usually tell Jane everything, and her lips were sealed. And no one was phoning me to say... Like that, 'No news is good news.'

Yet one afternoon, when I'd all but forgotten about his distressing revelation of however many weeks earlier, I did phone Johannes.

"Hello."

"Hi Joe, it's Eddie. Got a minute? I need to pick your brain."

"Sure, pick away."

And so I told him. For ages I'd been on the hunt for some seriously reliable information about the history of Amsterdam's red-light district. Whores had been a passion of mine since my late teens, a passion I'd pursued ardently in various parts of the world. And nowhere more vigorously than in and around Mokum's *walletjes*. But no matter how hard I looked, or whom I asked, I kept coming up short.

"I'll check it out," said Johannes. "You'll hear from me soon."

Soon was the following day, when he rang me.

"I've got it," he said.

"Got what?"

"What you want. A complete history of the red-light district. It's 172 pages, checked it out from the library but can't keep it that long. What say I stop by tomorrow and we use your machine to photocopy it. Will three o'clock be okay?"

"Great. See you then."

The book was *Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis en de bestrijding der prostitutie in Amsterdam* (literally, Contribution to the History and Combating of Prostitution in Amsterdam), by J.F. van Slobbe (a retired police official). And despite the 'combating' bit in the title, is a reasonably objective account of whoredom in the Dutch capital from around the 14th century until the mid-1930s. Which Johannes and I were able to update by consulting other books and magazine/newspaper articles (that Johannes likewise found!). I made two photocopy sets, one for each of us.

"Now what?" I said. "My spoken Dutch is getting better, but I still can't read it. And certainly not a book."

"But I can," he replied, accompanied by a wink. "We can translate it, together. It'll be fun. And we'll both learn something."

We set to work straightway. Putting aside several hours every Wednesday until the job was done. Joe did a rough verbal translation, we discussed that and related topics, while audio recording all of it. And eventually had the recording transcribed. Our Wednesday sessions became locally famous. So much so that once on another day of the week when Joe was visiting and the telephone rang and I was asked what I was doing and said, "Sitting here with Johannes," the caller responded with, "What, you mean it's Wednesday? I thought today was...!"

It was fun and we did learn a lot. About prostitution and each other. Joe revealed that he'd long been fascinated by the subject. (Hardly surprising. Practically everything fascinated Johannes!) All the more so given that during the German occupation of the Netherlands his grandmother had operated a high-class brothel in Groningen that catered exclusively to German army officers.

"She wasn't a collaborator," Joe explained, "or in any way a Nazi sympathizer. She simply felt that everyone would be better off if these guys were sexually satisfied rather than constantly frustrated. And yes, true, there was money in it. Nothing wrong with that."

"Tell you what I like most about red-light districts," Joe remarked in passing somewhere along the line. "It's the only boys who are definitely horny."

Mutually enjoying the project though we were, I insisted on paying Joe. Ten guilders an hour, I believe. I was in the money at the time, Johannes not yet. One Wednesday we were interrupted by the too early arrival of a business associate of mine.

"Just take a seat and feel free to listen in," I said. "We're close to wrapping up."

Fifteen minutes later saw the three of us starting to chat. With Joe telling my visitor what we were doing and how it began. And out of the blue summing up with: "Eddie has been paying me, which is all well and good. But—and this will come as news to Eddie—that's over now. I'm so much into this, and getting so much out of it, that from now on I won't be taking his money. We're a team, and teammates play not pay."

Within a handful of weeks we'd finished the translation. In due course copies of the transcript and the tape went into my archive at Stanford University. With both Joe and I keeping copies for ourselves. We never had the intention to publish; it was a learning exercise and a creative excuse for spending time in one another's company. But most importantly, Johannes was out of his 'Bowles depression' and wasn't going

anywhere! Had I coincidentally saved his life? Let's say circumstances did. That and a thirst we shared for getting to the bottom of things. For finding out. Whatever happens in life, happens for a reason, a purpose. And clearly the purpose of this was to keep Joe with us for a goodly while longer. And before long get on with becoming the Netherlands' foremost culinary expert. It was in that regard that Johannes and I had something else in common.

In the early 1970s I was a features writer for the *Bangkok Post*. I also served as the paper's food & drink editor. Which meant I wrote restaurant reviews. Our styles and methods of approach were different, but this gave Johannes and I something to compare notes on. Especially whenever we dined out, whether just or if I was joining him on one of his reviewing adventures. Joe would often mention this to people.

I may have been sitting pretty moneywise throughout the 1980s. Yet that came to an abrupt end in the summer of 1992 when I went belly-up bankrupt and lost the Ins & Outs building. With our financial fortunes reversed, Johannes subsequently dug deep into his pockets and pitched in on a number of occasions. He twice bought me a new pair of badly needed shoes. He voluntarily donated 1000 euros towards the 2004 publication of my poems cycle book, *Tsunami of Love*. And sometime afterwards paid off my £1300 credit card debt.

In short, Johannes van Dam was indeed a very good friend. His passing on September 18th 2013 was a sad occurrence. But sadder still was the suffering he endured leading up to that. He made the right choice in terminating all treatments. Johannes always made the right decision! RIP Joe.

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Eddie Woods is a widely-traveled poet & prose writer, who since 1978 has mainly resided in Amsterdam, Holland. Together with Jane Harvey, he launched Ins & Outs magazine and later founded Ins & Outs Press. His work has appeared in numerous online and print magazines, as well as anthologies. In September 2013, Inkblot Publications (Providence, Rhode Island) published Tennessee Williams in Bangkok, a memoir of the time Eddie spent living, loving, and writing in Thailand and Singapore.