

Bones of the Amazon, Part I of a Novella

by Tom Maremaa

What drunkenness is this that brings me hope

Who was the Cup-bearer, and whence the wine?

—Hafez

Lulu Petite was sitting in a lounge chair by the side of the pool when she heard the man splash into the water, almost unnoticed by the guests milling around the backyard of the palatial estate. Everybody, seemingly, was involved in a balancing act of one kind or another, drinks in one hand, hors d'oeuvres in the other, as the patter of social conversation filled the air.

Woodside was taking a breather from its usual, insular ways on that lazy Sunday afternoon in June and opening up a bit. She knew it had to do, mostly, with the owner of the estate, David Hawkins, a man of impeccable credentials in the Valley, whose success as a venture capitalist was well-known but whose gift for entertaining the local gentry was equally well-appreciated. As part of her job as food critic for the local Palo Alto Sentinel, she had written a profile of Mr. Hawkins and his penchant for fine wine and gourmet cooking. His invitation to come to the poolside party, where now, before her eyes, a middle-aged man had jumped into the circular pool with all his clothes on, seemed like a friendly gesture, but also a calculated move to create a little buzz for himself in the social columns of the paper.

She had taken no physical notes, only observing with a keen eye the comings and goings of the rich at Mr. Hawkins's estate and storing those memories somewhere in the back of her mind for later retrieval. When she reviewed the cuisine of any restaurant assigned to her by her boss, she employed a similar technique of simply remembering every item she had touched on the menu, without jotting down a word in her notebook. When it came time to write her

review, usually late at night, the description of every bite of food she had eaten spilled out spontaneously, paragraph after paragraph, in the cleanest copy her boss, a stickler for proper grammar and spelling, had ever seen. This Sunday, watching the parade of Valley honchos and hotshots, she was composing her story on the fly: it was practically writing itself.

Until the man in the pool failed to surface. Bubbles sputtered and spat for a minute or two, then came to a resounding halt. Nobody was paying any attention, with the notable exception of David's trophy wife, who was standing at the far end of pool, tucking a cellphone into the back pocket of her skin-tight designer jeans. There was a peculiar, almost devilish smile on her face, which Lulu could not help but notice. David's wife then motioned to the guests to follow her into the house while the man still had not bobbed up to the top of the water, a contrapuntal move that made no sense to Lulu, as if a cook had attempted to mesh together two incompatible ingredients, sugar and salt, into a dish of dubious creation.

The Valley itself was riddled with contradictions, she thought to herself. You only have to look around, don't you? For a moment, an image of her late husband streaked across her mind, evoking fragments of memory: the specter of death.

A PORCELIN URN containing her husband's ashes sat above the fireplace. She had wanted to scatter his ashes in the cold waters of the Pacific, or, more appropriately, on the front lawns of the Apple campus, where he had worked with great pride and dedication until his untimely death two years ago.

Yet she had kept the urn, unmoved, in its place. Not that she was particularly sentimental, although there were times when she could still feel his presence and not a day went by when she was not mourning his loss. Jake had provided dearly for her, with a fat life insurance policy, some stock options and other holdings, as well as the condo she was still living in after his death. Somehow, he had discovered during their years together her true calling, and he had identified it right away: she was a born critic, and in particular, a

born critic of food. In the kitchen, she would critique her own meals while she was cooking, and certainly, wherever they happened to go out for lunch or dinner, the cooking of others. Her palette could detect every ingredient in a sauce or salad dressing, and whether it measured up to her high standards. While Jake her computer programmer husband would bend over backwards to forgive a hamburger that was slightly overcooked and without much taste, she would fearlessly hold her ground and demand that the waiter return the item and replace it with one that was cooked properly.

The perfectionist in her reigned supreme. With effort over time, she was able to teach Jake a thing or two about food and its importance in the everyday life of the Valley. You are what you eat: this cliché had become a credo by which she and Jake lived. When she saw Jake's coworkers at Apple eating on campus at the excellent Caffé Macs cafeteria, shoveling large quantities of food into their mouths without even the slightest idea of what they were eating, it drove her bonkers. One time, she threw up her arms in dismay at the sight of a young geek, probably a programmer working on the latest version of the Mac OS X operating system, stuffing his face with burnt pizza, as if he were feeding a robot and not a human being. Again, Jake was willing to forgive, and would make up some lame excuse, to her mind, related to the pressure of writing code and fixing bugs, as to why such wanton disregard for the quality of one's food prevailed.

Yet she was unconvinced, hard as he tried. She insisted the programmer must change, and ordered Jake, if he happened to know the man, to have a nice little sitdown talk and set him straight. After all, Apple's illustrious cofounder, Steve Jobs, was a known vegan, quite health conscious; employees did not need to eat out of vending machines because Caffé Macs offered the best of the best, she had observed on visits to the Apple campus. When Jake took her there for lunch, she noticed the daily baskets full of locally grown, organic apples free to all, as well as the giant metal containers of hot, tasty broth that appeared on Wednesdays and Fridays, again free to all.

Her unabashed reviews of local restaurants had created a bit of a firestorm for her publisher, but had nonetheless earned her a loyal following among her readers. The e-mails poured in by the hundreds, all favorable, after she had critically reviewed the lunch and dinners of a restaurant everybody knew in Palo Alto whose cuisine had fallen short of expectations. The chef had threatened to put out a contract on her life—if he could get a handle on her true identity, as there were no photographs of her anywhere to be found, and each time she reviewed a restaurant she wore a disguise of one thing or another: sometimes a wig and dark glasses, or a face heavily made up to mask her appearance. Even her name, Lulu Petite, was made up, coming from a French comic book, *Petite Lulu*, she used to read as a child, and with whom she identified because of the little girl's brashness and rebel spirit.

The Sentinel managing editor had tried to shift the emphasis of her work by assigning her to report on the cooking experiences of Valley entrepreneurs and computer hotshots. As it happened, David Hawkins, the venture capitalist who practically owned the suite of offices and buildings on Sand Hill Road and had made a fortune from a spate of Valley startup investments, was also a gourmet cook, and had earned a reputation for doing Sunday afternoon barbecues at his estate house in Woodside that were the talk of the town: kabobs cooked in true Persian style, lamb chops plain or marinated for several days, and bountiful quantities of basmati rice with real saffron and huge platters of fresh fruits and vegetables. When Lulu had heard all of this from her editor, she thought: this is truly a man after my heart. This is what truly great men do: cook as if their lives depended on it.

And yet if she met with Mr. Hawkins and reported on his adventures in cooking for the paper, he as well as whomever was with him would know her identity. She would be unmasked. All the waiters and cooks in the Valley, from San Jose to Menlo Park, from Saratoga to San Francisco would recognize her immediately whenever she happened to arrive at restaurant for review. My cover will be blown, as they say in the C.I.A., she thought. At first, she

rejected the assignment from her editor, making a convincing argument that for a simple reporting story, she would end up paying a heavy price. But her editor came to her a day later and said, "He's delighted that you'll do the piece and promises never to tell anybody who you are. Sworn to secrecy, OK?"

"You believe him?"

"Yes."

Under these circumstances she had no choice. Two weeks before that ill-fated Sunday episode by pool, she arrived in her little red Honda Civic at Mr. Hawkins's estate, reporter's notebook in hand, tape recorder in her purse in case she needed it. Admittedly, she had dolled herself up a bit for the occasion. I need to look my best, she had told the face with the lines and wrinkles staring at her in the mirror that morning. Otherwise, he'll think I look frumpy and he won't respect me. She had on pink blush and a flaming red lipstick she had bought from the makeup counter at the front of Bloomingdale's on a mindless spree one Saturday at Stanford shopping center. She wore slacks, flat shoes, and a plain white Apple T-shirt with a big X across the front, signifying her late husband's dedication to Mac OS X. It was her way of saying she was part of the Valley culture, an icon in her own right as a local food critic, and did not need to flaunt her status with expensive clothes because that status was already hers to do with as she wished.

David Hawkins extended his hand and shook hers when he opened the imposing, eighteen-foot high front door of the estate house. He smiled and welcomed her, as if she were the most important person in the world. It was this charm and graciousness that she knew infused his cooking experiences: we cook what we are, she thought. The estate sprawled over seven acres of prime Woodside, with a row of giant eucalyptus trees to one side and a row of thick hedges to the other. The main house was constructed in the style of a French Normandy castle, with imperial rooftops and giant turrets jutting up to the sky. Inside, one had to take a deep breath to expand into the enormity of the space. David Hawkins's kitchen was, appropriately enough, simply huge. A large island at its center

commanded all the attention. Several stainless steel refrigerators, and the latest in gas ovens caught her eye. Food was spread on the island and a feast was in progress.

“Don't let me disturb whatever you're cooking,” she told him. “Just let me watch.”

“By the way, Miss Petite, I enjoy your columns very much,” he said. “You have a lot of respect for good food. I like that.”

In the course of an hour, as she scratched notes in her spiral-bound book, he lectured her on how he had got started with cooking, learning from his mother when he was growing up, later taking some classes at a cooking school in Palo Alto, even one time contemplating a career as a chef, before getting his engineering degree and venturing into the briar patch of software development and entrepreneurship. “We have a thing in my business called sanity checking. Ever hear of it?” he said. “Well, it's when you have to make sure a piece of code works the way everybody says it's supposed to work right before its release. You test the hell out of it to see if anything breaks. Cooking's my sanity check on life. It's how I know if I'm alive and well and doing the right thing.”

Lulu's husband, a child of the programming universe, used to speak in the same idiom, so she was familiar with what David Hawkins was trying to say, and she knew it would make good copy for her piece about successful Valley folk and their forays into the world of cooking.

He was a tall man, not particularly handsome, with a balding pate and a slightly pudgy face, as well as a big stomach. He looked to be in his early fifties, somewhat nerdish, she thought, but certainly kind enough to host a succession of Sunday barbecues at his estate when many of his neighbors in Woodside would simply retreat behind iron gates and close themselves off from the demands of the outside world, privacy and keeping an air of exclusivity being their main concerns. Interestingly, she noticed he had a special earbud plugged into his right ear cavity. At first she thought he was hard of hearing, but such was not the case. David Hawkins had invested in a local startup that was producing the next generation of cellphones, ones

so tiny you could keep them plugged almost permanently in your ear, with an accompanying device in your pocket that had a voice-activated speech mechanism the size of a dime, yet sensitive enough to let you speak in a whisper. The earbuds were still experimental and might not always work properly, David explained when she asked out of curiosity. "But they're the future, and that's where I'm placing my bet. You never know," he laughed, "one day these might become a life saver for somebody."

Just as she was finishing her interview, watching keenly as he was demonstrating his cooking prowess, chopping vegetables, sprinkling garlic on a light lunch he was preparing, the front door swung open and in came a young woman, probably half his age, with a bone-thin figure, heavy mascara and curls of long blonde hair flowing all the way down to her waist. She had an air of superiority about her, haughty and more than a little disdainful, as if to say: who are you lady and what are you doing in my house? David Hawkins seemed to enjoy his young wife's natural command of the estate, yet at the same time the look on his face was more than a little apologetic. "Sondra, I want you meet a very special person," he said, trying to have it both ways. "Miss Lulu Petite writes a wonderful food column in the local paper. She's a great critic."

Lulu Petite extended her hand, smiled pleasantly, and said hello. Yet there was no response. Sondra walked by and then turned to her husband, "What's she doing here? Thought you had a meeting this afternoon."

"Excuse me, but my wife and I have to talk," said the venture capitalist, disappearing with Sondra outside into the Japanese garden, where Lulu could hear in the distance each raising voices and shouting at the other.

Trophy wife, she thought. The man's a sucker for a trophy wife.

There were stories all the time in the local paper of successful Valley honchos abandoning their wives of twenty or thirty years and running off blindly with some young thing. This looked like another example, in Lulu's eyes. The woman was probably twenty-five or twenty-six and they had probably met while he was working late one

night in the office, and he had seduced her, or she him in the backseat of his BMW on the black leather with her siren's call, and before anybody knew it she was in his life, pressing him to divorce his wife of thirty years. Men are such fools, she thought, as she stood in the kitchen waiting for David Hawkins to return and to finish the meal he had prepared so carefully and with such gusto. Maybe I ought to leave.

Anyhow, he recovered nicely, apologizing on his return. It was a minor glitch in the interview, like the glitches he must have dealt with on a daily basis when he was writing code and building software applications during his programming days.

After she wrote the story for the Palo Alto Sentinel and sang his praises in print, he called her up and invited her to come to his Sunday barbecue. "I won't tell anybody who you are, OK?" he said. "I'll make up a name for you. Won't you be my guest?"

Lulu tried to beg off the invitation but it was too good to pass up. Lots of Woodside folk and Valley bigwigs she was curious to find out about.

"OK, I'll come. Just introduce me as Jacque Pépin," she said. "We'll see if anybody gets a laugh out of that."

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To read further, Parts II and III of the novella, please contact me at <tom.maremaa@gmail.com> and I'll email them to you in PDF format.

