

TEXT:

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Buddha's Hand

PHOTOS:

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New Fiction
by Lara Vapnyar

LOCATION:

Bangkok & San Francisco

GOOD

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“Interesting fruit. Looks like a cross between a lemon and an octopus.”

“You think so?”

The fruit in question was called a Buddha’s Hand, but it didn’t resemble Buddha’s hand, or anybody else’s hand for that matter. The man was right—more than anything, it looked like an octopus made out of lemon peel.

Buddha’s Hand seemed to be utterly useless because it didn’t have any juicy pulp. All it had was rind. “Very strong flavor—excellent for grating into fish dishes,” the vendor claimed, but the flavor wasn’t that much different from the flavor of a regular lemon, which cost five times less.

Yet Lena managed to discover Buddha’s Hand’s secret purpose, unknown to cookbook authors or fruit vendors: Whenever she picked it up, men would talk to her. Unfailingly, every single time! Which almost never happened to her. Lena’s beauty had always been of a quiet, bittersweet (or maybe even bitter-sour) variety. She certainly wasn’t the type to turn men’s heads, let alone entice them into talking to her. Not that she needed to meet men. She wasn’t single, after all. Lonely—yes, lost—certainly, but not single.

When she got off the plane in San Francisco, she was overcome with the sudden sense of freedom and that feeling that anything at all could happen to her at any moment.

This was the first vacation Lena was spending without Ben since they had gotten married two years ago. They had decided that, since Ben would be going to Bangkok, Lena would go to San Francisco to spend some time with her friend Bella.

But then Bella met a guy, fell in love, and agreed to go to Lake Tahoe with him. She did apologize, and you couldn’t blame somebody for falling in love—could you? Lena had already bought the plane ticket, so she decided to go and stay in San Francisco on her own.

“Won’t you be lonely?” Ben had asked.

“I don’t know,” Lena answered.

She was curious to see if she would be. Before Ben, she used to spend a lot of time on her own, and was quite proficient at it. She would feel sad at times, but never empty

or bored. She was afraid that since she had married Ben, she had lost this skill. Whatever she did seemed to be connected to him somehow, directed at him, laced with some memory of him.

But when she got off the plane in San Francisco, she was overcome with the sudden sense of freedom and that feeling that anything at all could happen to her at any moment—and that something exciting would happen, *must* happen. The feeling was both electrifying and unnerving.

On her first day in San Francisco, she walked through the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market, between the stalls dominated by citrus fruits. Orange, yellow, purple, round. Round in different ways, but still round. Then, she saw the yellow fruit that wasn’t round at all. A bunch of them lay on a stand next to lemons and oranges, and it was clearly a citrus fruit, but a truly bizarre one. All those tentacles—thin, fat, long, short, straight, twisted. She picked one up—it was quite heavy, the surface both grainy and sleek. She sniffed it—a blend of lemon and something else, something artificial. She was about to put it down when a very handsome man came up to her and asked her what it was. The man was there with his wife, so the conversation ended rather abruptly when the wife yelled at him over Lena’s head: “Jon! We’re double-parked!”

Lena couldn’t remember the last time a man that handsome had talked to her. “Must be the fruit,” she decided. So she walked away, let a few minutes pass, then came back and picked up another Buddha’s Hand. Within minutes, there was another man by her side, asking her what it was and what you could cook with it.

You could say that Buddha’s Hand, strange-looking and rare, simply provided a topic for conversation, but Lena preferred to think that the fruit itself possessed some secret powers of attraction.

The farmers market turned out to be her favorite place in San Francisco. She loved other things, too—the view of the Golden Gate Bridge, the shore, the strange perspective of the streets, Chinatown—but nothing matched the excitement of the farmers market. Bright colors, the smell of sea mixed